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The Red Brotherhood; OR, THE TWELVE AVENGERS.

BY W. J. HAMILTON.

In the South Sea there is a singular serpent known as the "Red Dukite," a serpent which seems gifted with the power of reason. A long, slender, red body of singular beauty, with diamond eyes and pointed head, and as venomous as the *Cobra di Capello*. The legend—however true it may be—is that this snake goes always in company with a companion, and if one is killed and the other is not found and dispatched also, the slayer is doomed. Wherever he goes the "Red Dukite" glides on silently, waiting patiently for the time when he can strike his poisoned fangs into the flesh of the man who has dared to slay his companion. The Dukite makes no mistake, and the Indian is not a more tireless or efficient scout than he. That trail and that trail alone he follows through the silent night or the sultry day, and when the tired man sinks to rest it is only to feel the envenomed fangs buried in his flesh and then too late he knows that the "Red Dukite" has avenged his "friend." If business presses and the slayer passes sleepless nights, still the Dukite is ever near, waiting, waiting, relentless as death, silent as the tomb. This is the history of the terrible Dukite, the red scourge of the South Sea.

A ship lies at anchor before San Francisco, one of those great packets that ply between Australia and the American coast. Upon the deck looking out toward the great city, the Queen of the West, is a group of persons of whom this story treats. Three men, one in the prime of manhood, tall and sinewy, and two young men, in whose faces you can see the features of the elder person. They are brothers, and the elder man's sons. A fourth individual of the group, and yet not with it, standing a little apart in a half-respectful, half-careless manner peculiar to the old family servant. It is an Irish face, full of rollicking good humor, the type of that nation at once the most impudent and yet most successful—out of their own green isle—of any the world knows. In love, war and politics—happy Pat reigns supreme.

Two ladies are with the

party, one a stately woman, the wife of the elder gentleman, the other her daughter, a beautiful girl of eighteen. Mabel Delisle was beautiful with the beauty of face, form and soul. Her sunny brown hair, fair complexion, blue eyes and cherry lips; her form, graceful as the swaying reed; her disposition—all combined to make her that noblest of all God's creatures, a pure and lovely woman.

"So, good-by forever to the South Seas and the dangers we have escaped," said Oscar Delisle, as he looked toward the shore. "There lies the land where vengeance can never reach us."

"Would that you had never invoked it, Oscar," said Mr. Delisle. "We have escaped, it is true, but think what might have happened if we had been compelled to remain in the South Seas."

A sneering smile passed over the face of Oscar Delisle, and he uttered a low laugh.

"How our enemy will howl when he knows

that we have eluded him after all the toils he set. The Red Dukite has failed in his vengeance once, and I—the man he hated—have done the work."

"He is a terrible being, and a man of rare ability, Oscar. We have done well to escape him, and in this land we have a refuge where the vengeance of the Red Dukite can never come. What do you say, Walter?"

Walter Delisle was leaning over the rail, looking steadily toward the land with a look of doubt and trouble in his face.

"Father," replied the young man, turning his face toward the speaker, "I am sorry to say that I do not share your opinion in regard to our safety."

"Why?"

"Because, when we escaped from the island, Oscar was foolish enough to send a message to the Red Dukite, telling him he would meet him in Melbourne."

"Did you do that, Oscar?" cried Mr. Delisle,

turning a wild look upon the proud face of his eldest son.

"Could you have been so mad—you—who brought this trouble on us?"

"I would not for the chance of a life of trouble, lose the opportunity to defy our enemy. He had driven me mad by his persecutions, and it would have broken my heart if I could not answer his insults in some way."

"If the avenger is on our track, who is to be blamed if not you, Oscar? You have brought us into danger and add to it when we have thrown our pursuer off the track. You have much to answer for, Oscar Delisle. But we must not hesitate, and as for staying in San Francisco for twenty-four hours, I shall not do it."

"We must stop in San Francisco," was Oscar's angry retort. "You promised me to go into business here, and you must keep your word."

"We have suffered enough from your folly and pride," replied Mr. Delisle. "We were delayed four days at Melbourne; how do you know that the avenger is not already on our track?"

"Let him come if he dares!" hissed the young man. "I will give a good account of him when I meet him anywhere."

"You were not so eager to meet him in the islands, Oscar," said Walter, in his quiet way. "If it had not been for me upon two occasions you would have felt the weight of the Red Dukite's vengeance."

"Boaster! Because you were fortunate enough, by a series of lucky accidents, to obtain a momentary advan-



THE AMBUSH.

take over our enemy you presume upon it to demean me."

"Walter is no boaster, Oscar," was Mabel's quiet reminder.

"Bah; you always take his part."

"Whatever folly I may be capable of, Oscar Delisle, I will not be guilty of this one longer. If any of his envoys should be upon the ship how you would betray yourself. Three times have you spoken that terrible name, which you ought never to utter, and which would be a sure guide to those who hate us. Let us land and lose ourselves in the great city where we can make up our plans."

"I say—stay in San Francisco."

"We cannot decide that now; here, Pat."

"All right, Masther Wallie; phat'll I do for ye?"

"Get out our baggage, as we propose to land at once. Send it up to the Lick House."

"Lick—is it? Sure an' that's a foine name, alannah. A beauty av a name, bedad, an' it's meself, Patsey O'Rafferty, County Connaught, 88th Connaught Rangers, w'd do phat ye's order me. Lick indade! Phoo! Phat a name."

Patsey busied himself in getting out the baggage, which was sent on shore, and the party landed soon after. Patsey reached the "Lick House" before the others, and when he met them in the vestibule he placed a folded paper in the hands of Oscar.

"A jintleman bid me give it ye's, masther."

Oscar opened the paper slowly and the moment his eyes rested on the inclosure he uttered a cry of alarm and reeled back, pale as death. Upon the paper was an exact representation of the Red Dukite in the attitude of striking. The pursuer was on the track.

CHAPTER I.

THE SERPENT SYMBOL.

THE "hotel" in a Californian "city" at the base of the foothills. "City" is a term variously applied in the West. It may mean San Francisco or Sacramento, or it may mean a cluster of rude shanties nestling down beside some gold stream or quartz ledge. If the latter, the busy quartz mill is at work, the great crushers dropping with stunning force upon the white rock, grinding it to powder, while in the other parts of the mill science was extracting from that mass of white dust its virgin gold. Tampa City occupied a middle rank between the great ocean cities and the last named. It had its quartz mills to be sure, but it had also its daily paper, fire department and the other machinery of municipal government. It was just now a busy town, for a new ledge had been "developed" and it was in the flush times when every one was crazy about stocks, and money was free as air.

Walter Delisle was seated on the wide veranda of the "hotel," smoking a cheroot which had found its way from Manila to San Francisco, and then to his hands. The young man was in a brown study, and in the midst of it he was touched on the shoulder by a lad wearing the picturesque dress of Mexico.

"Senor," he said, "my master wishes to speak to you."

"Ah," said Walter, starting to his feet. "Where is your master?"

"Do not disturb yourself, senor," said a quiet, melodious voice at his elbow. "I am in despair at troubling you, but I have a little business with you which must be attended to."

The young man looked up and saw a fine, stately-looking Californian of noble presence, dressed in the rich garb of the Mexican Hidalgo who has riches to back him. He was not young—perhaps fifty years of age—and the expression of his face was at once noble and pleasing.

"You are called Walter Delisle?" he said, in a questioning tone.

"How did you know my name, sir?"

"I shall explain that presently, but this is neither the time nor place for doing so. Look in my face and tell me whether you will trust yourself to my honor if I ask you to ride with me to my ranch to the south of the foothills."

"Your business is important?"

"Life or death!" replied the Californian.

"I am at your service."

"Holla, Juan!" cried the gentleman. "A horse for the Senor Delisle; he rides with me."

The boy ran up with a magnificent "American" horse—an animal much valued on the Pacific slope. Walter was about to leap into the saddle when he thought that he ought to leave some word at the hotel, for he expected the family soon.

"Juan will stay," said the Californian. "He is a sharp boy, small as he is, and will do your

bidding. If any of the senor's friends must see him, Juan, you know where to find him."

The boy nodded gravely and took a seat on the veranda ready in case any of the friends of Delisle made their appearance, and the two gentlemen rode away among the foothills, each engaged in the study of the other. From the expression of both faces it was plain that the impression was mutually agreeable; each was satisfied that the other was a nobleman.

"You are but young, Senor Delisle," said the Californian, as they rode along through the breezy foothills. "Might I, without giving offense, ask your age?"

"Twenty-five last May," replied Delisle, promptly. "Young enough to lack experience and to rely upon older men for the knowledge which years of experience must have imparted."

The Californian bowed and looked pleased, for he had come of a race in which the young deferred to the experience of age—a quality very rare in this fast century when too many of the young look upon their elders as "old fogies."

"I have not intruded upon you without a purpose, my young friend," said the Californian. "In the land from which you have come did you not make deadly enemies?"

"Yes."

"May I ask from whence you came?"

"From the South Sea islands, where my father was a trader."

"Can you tell me more or do you fear to trust me?"

"I never do anything by halves, and I claim the ability to read the human face. You, senor, with whose name even I am not acquainted, would be cut into inch pieces sooner than divulge that which has been imparted to you under the seal of confidence, and your word of honor not to reveal it until I give you leave."

"You have my word. We are now upon my ranch, and in this open plain no one can approach without our knowledge. Shall we alight here to allow you to tell your story?"

The two descended, picketed their horses and sat down on a mossy knoll, side by side.

"In the islands of the Australian group, where we were located for a few years, my brother—who is of rather a quick temper—became embroiled with a man who had the command of a society known as the 'Red Dukites.' The Dukite is a serpent of the South Seas, and from the strange persistency with which these serpents follow the trail of a man who has killed one of their kind, this society took its name. They were a sort of secret brotherhood, with laws unlike those of any other secret organization in the world, the fundamental principle of which is the avenging of a brother's blood."

"These Dukites hated us, as they hated all outsiders; and, singular as it may seem, the leader of this strange society was a white man, and many others of the order were of the same race. My brother, meeting with two of these men while engaged in collecting sandalwood, had some hot words with them, and was threatened by them with dangers which he could not avert. It passed off for that time, but meeting one of the men again, in the village, they had a struggle, and my brother shot the Dukite through the heart. It was said, although I was not a witness to the struggle, that there was something unfair on my brother's part. It is said that the members of the Dukite society, like their serpent prototype, always go in company—a single companion always being at some point near at hand, on the watch. This was the case in the present instance. The man slain was the second officer of the society, and the one on the watch was his 'double'—also a white man, whose face I have never seen, but who has made himself our deadly enemy from that hour."

"Go on."

"The first warning we had was the day after the death of the Dukite. A paper was pinned upon our door, bearing a picture of the Red Dukite, with erected head ready to strike, and a few words in the native language warning us to be prepared for death, for the Dukites were on the trail, and we were doomed. Two days after, my brother, passing through a thicket of cane, was set upon by two masked men armed with long knives. He had a pistol, but they closed with him before he could fire it, and carried him away, after binding his arms. It was their intention to take him to their place of meeting in the mountains, and there sacrifice him to appease the *manes* of the man he had slain. By great good fortune, I met them on the other side of the canes, and as one of the men lifted his knife to plunge it into Oscar's heart, I broke

his arm by a well-directed shot. The two men plunged into the canes and escaped."

"A second time they seized my brother upon the sea-shore, whence they hurried him into a boat and put out to sea. This time he would certainly have been doomed, but I was coming into the lagoon, the same day, with a cargo of goods from Melbourne, where I had been to trade. In the darkness of the night we struck the boat, cutting her in two, and leaving them floating on the surface. We got out our lanterns, and found my brother clinging to a broken fragment of the wrecked craft, but not another man was to be found. They swim like ducks, and had reached the shore."

"My sister was the next attacked, and I managed to rescue her just in time. It was plain that we could not remain on the islands, and one night we placed our valuables on our little sloop and embarked. But my brother foolishly sent a defiance to the Dukite whom he most hated, which told him where we had gone. We were in Melbourne nearly a week longer than we expected, and the Red Dukite had taken advantage of the time lost to trail us. And, senor, when we entered the Lick House from the packet, my servant placed in Oscar's hands a parchment upon which was printed in red ink the sign of the Dukites—the threatening serpent ready to strike. We know that our enemy is on the trail."

"Hush," said the Californian. "Here comes a stranger, and we must wait until he passes before I can tell you why I came to you."

A stockman's hut obstructed the view at a distance of half a mile, and a horseman was spurring rapidly down the road toward them. As he came nearer, it was plain that he was admirably mounted, for his horse covered the ground in gallant style. It was an American horse, seventeen hands high, with splendid action—the model of a trotter. The stranger was of powerful frame, singularly handsome, and wearing the peculiar drooping mustache generally worn by high-caste Brahmins. At the first glance, a looker-on would have taken him for a Hindoo, but a closer look revealed the fact that the olive brown of his complexion was the work of the sun, and not of nature. As he reined in his horse before the pair seated on the knoll, he looked at them in a quick, searching way.

"I crave your pardon, gentlemen," he said; "but may I ask if I am on the road to Tampa City?"

He spoke English well, but in a slow way, which was either the result of habit, or from the fact that he had not used the language much of late, notably the fact when an Englishman gives up the use of his native tongue in ordinary conversation for long years.

"You are in the way, senor," replied the Californian, politely. "I give you good-day."

"The same to you, senor," replied the stranger, whose dark eyes seemed to scan the face of Delisle with intense earnestness. "Is it far to the city?"

"Perhaps five miles."

The man thanked them and rode on rapidly while Walter looked after him with a doubtful expression not unmixed with fear. What was there in the sight of this man's handsome face and his melodious voice to arouse such strange thoughts in him? Why did his mind go back at once to the island-studded lagoons of the South Sea, the lofty trees and the spice-laden breezes of the tropics?

"I have seen that man before," he muttered, "but where it was I can not tell. In South America, Panama, Melbourne—where? Confound the luck if I can place him, and I would give a thousand dollars to be certain of my man."

"There comes another," said the Californian, "and Santa Maria! He is as like the other as one bullet from my rifle is like its fellow."

It was true! The man who now advanced was mounted on a fine American horse, wore the drooping mustache, and had the same olive-brown complexion as the man who preceded him. He, too, pulled up and asked the way to Tampa City, and his voice could hardly be distinguished from that of the first stranger. As before, his gaze rested longest upon Delisle, and the same glitter came into his eyes. Then he rode on and the two men looked at each other in wonder.

"There is something in this deeper than you imagine, Senor Delisle," said the Californian. "You have made me your confidant, and now I will return the favor as far as I can. Do you remember a young Mexican on board the packet who became quite intimate with your party under the name of Estevan Cordeval?"

"Certainly," replied the young man, his face lighting up with delight. "A really fine young gentleman."

"Thanks; you honor me in saying it, for Estevan is a son of whom I am proud. Yesterday I received a letter from him sent by a special messenger. He told me that he had made your acquaintance on the packet and that you had honored him with your friendship. After you had left San Francisco he discovered the following facts:

"You have been followed from the South Sea Islands by these men who hate you. They were on the same steamer with you when you left Melbourne, twelve in number. These twelve men have money in abundance, and have sworn to their comrades that they will never return to them until they have avenged, in person of your brother and his family, the murder of their officer. The arrangement of their plan he can not tell you, except this: you are the first victim and your brother the last."

"Why am I the first?"

"Because they fear you most. They say that you are active and bold, and that until you are destroyed there can be no safety for them in carrying out their plans. Not that they hate you as much as they do your brother."

"Then Oscar and the family are safe until I am under the sod? So be it. I accept the gage thrown down by my secret foes who have driven me to the wall. I will live—I will pit myself against the twelve who have banded themselves against me and I will beat them if my life is spared."

"Brave young man! Do you then offer yourself as a sacrifice to save those you love? Then I give you my word that the power I have in this country shall be used to assist you. But, when do you expect your father and his family?"

"They may come at any moment."

"Then they are in danger from this hour and we must work. Ha; what is that?"

Something white came fluttering through the air and fell at their feet. It was a long arrow with a paper impaled upon the shaft which Senor Cordoval detached and held up. And there, imprinted in full upon the sheet, was the serpent symbol of the Red Dukites, and underneath these words in the language of the South Seas:

"The Dukites are silent and know how to be patient. When the time comes, they strike; when they strike, the blow is sure. You in your pride of youth have laughed at the Dukites' arm. Guard your breast, if you can, for soon the doom shall cover you like a pall. Beware the sting of the serpent!"

CHAPTER II.

SHOWING THEIR HAND.

THE new friends looked in each other's faces in dismay for they had scarcely expected the blow to fall so soon. But Walter Delisle was not the man to remain long inactive, and he sprang to his feet suddenly.

"If the Dukite has a sting, at least I know the antidote. Senor, there is danger in the very air we breathe, and I was not wrong in saying that my brother would yet destroy our family. When I think that his thrice-cursed folly has brought this evil upon us, I am almost tempted to forget that he is my brother; but I cannot do that."

"I fear that there is little brotherly love between you," said Senor Cordoval.

"You are right, senor; and yet I would have loved him but he would not permit it. I have no other brother, and if he would give back my affection I should be glad; but he is cold and proud in his self-conceit, and we can never love each other much. What shall we do, now that we know that the enemy is on our trail?"

"I do not know whether it is safe to move, even now," replied the Californian. "You are armed?"

Delisle showed a pair of elegant pistols and a long knife.

"Good at close quarters, but you must learn to carry a rifle and to use it."

"I have little to learn in that respect," said Walter, quietly.

"You don't know our western marksmen, I think," was the reply.

"I have no doubt you can shoot well, but can you drive a nail at a hundred yards, or crease a mustang on the jump? Until you can do this—until you can hit the eye of an Indian in the glare of the camp-fire, you cannot equal our men. But come, we must be on the way."

He swung himself quickly into the saddle, and bursting suddenly through a thicket on the

right, he rode away across the plain toward the white-walled ranch, which now could be seen, three or four miles away. People in the East have no real conception of the extent of these great stock-ranches in the West, where a man has a long ride to reach the end of his own land, and Senor Cordoval was one of the largest land-owners in the State. They passed corrals filled with great bees ready to be shipped to market; other corrals in which hundreds of horses bounded to and fro, shaking their tangled manes and neighing wildly, as the horsemen went by. They were still a mile from the hacienda, when they heard a clear halloo, and a horse came through a mezquit hedge on the right, bearing on his back a young girl wearing a rich costume of the Mexican maiden of high rank. She rode "en Amazon," curbing her powerful mustang as she saw the two gentlemen.

She was a rare beauty, this child of the West. Dark, flowing locks rolled almost to her saddle; her dark eyes were seas of liquid fire; her sweet face was full of enthusiasm, and her graceful form swayed to the motion of her horse. The scarlet *magua* which she wore set off her graces to advantage. Beneath this, she wore a silken vest of blue over a skirt of the same color, and dainty Turkish trowsers, fastened at the ankle, could not entirely conceal the symmetry of her limbs. Natty little boots, armed with the spur which Mexicans are too fond of using, were set into her stirrups, and the hand which grasped the rein so firmly was small and shapely.

"Hola, senores!" with a merry laugh. "*Aqui esta un par muy fino!*" (Here is a very fine pair.) "Why do you leave me alone at the hacienda, when you know that I cannot endure solitude?"

"You must excuse me this time, my daughter," replied Senor Cordoval, fondly, "for I have business at Tampa. Senor Delisle, you see my daughter, of whom her brother must have spoken to you, for her name is ever on his lips. Zoraya, this is Senor Walter Delisle, of whom Estevan spoke when he wrote last."

The senora put out a pretty little hand with a royal grace, and it sunk like a feather into the palm of the young man, who held it fully as long as etiquette would allow.

"I am delighted to meet the sister of Don Estevan, senora. I assure you that he sung your praises from morning till night, and my own sister is wild to know you."

"Why did you not bring her with you?" cried Zoraya, impulsively. "Ah, to have a friend, one of my own age, who would take delight in my pursuits—that would be happiness indeed!"

"It will not be long before she will be here, as I expect them at Tampa every hour. When they come—"

"They shall not stay at Tampa!" cried Zoraya. "Father, assure Senor Delisle that all will be welcome at the Hacienda de Cordoval."

"It is not necessary for me to say that they will be welcome," answered her father. "And, indeed, I think she is right, for more reasons than one, and for the present there is no place so safe as my house. I have a hundred men in my employ, and at least thirty of them are Americans, for, when it comes to fighting, I have but little faith in my own countrymen, and the Indians have taken pleasure in driving my cattle the wrong way, many times, until my American braves persuaded them to stop. But we waste time here, and you must be hungry, after fasting so long. Let us go to the hacienda, at once."

Walter was ready to agree to anything which would keep him at the side of Senora Zoraya, and they rode away at a foot-pace, the young man listening with eager attention to the sparks of humor which fell from her tongue, for Senora Zoraya loved to talk! But, that is not singular; few women differ from her in that respect. The ride to the hacienda was all too short, and they rode into a spacious courtyard, surrounded by adobe walls—a court which had stood for generations—for the family was one of the oldest in Upper California.

"Welcome to the home of my fathers, senor!" said the owner, quietly and gravely. "I am one of the few among my countrymen who have had the wit to see that the so-called conquest of California was the best thing that ever happened to us. Enter."

They passed into the spacious room, furnished in luxurious style, for the Californian was rich enough to command any luxury he wished. They seated themselves, and while the elder gentleman touched a bell and ordered dinner, Zoraya took up a guitar and sung to that pleasing accompaniment the ancient war-songs of the Cid, and Walter was really annoyed when dinner was announced. The meal was of the rich-

est description, and when it was over, the gentlemen adjourned to the azotea for a siesta and cigars.

Zoraya would have accompanied them, but at a sign from her father, much to the chagrin of Walter, she remained behind. From the azotea they looked out upon the broad plain stretching along the base of the foot-hills, and beyond the blue peaks of the Sierras rising against the summer sky. They had scarcely reached the roof when Senor Cordoval touched his companion on the arm and pointed to the South, in the direction of Tampa City. "Look there!"

Two men were meeting in the midst of the plain, about five miles distant. But in that clear atmosphere objects are seen more distinctly than in other lands, and even at that distance, Walter could make out the two persons that had passed them on the plain.

To make sure, he took up a glass which lay upon the parapet and leveled it at the pair, and their faces were brought into view with a precision which was startling.

"Magnificent glass, this," said Walter, as he glued his eye to the tube. "Yes, senor, you are right; those are the very fellows who passed us and they seem to be hail-fellows-well-met, too. They are making signals now."

As he spoke other men appeared from every direction, until twelve were grouped on the plain in close conference. By the aid of the glass Walter was able to make out the fact that they were dressed exactly alike and had the same cut of beard as the first two.

Twelve men! Twelve of the Red Dukites had been deputed to hunt him down, chosen doubtless for their vigor and skill. He knew well that such a striking similarity of face was not natural, and there was something here which he could not understand, but of one thing he was sure: the mystic band were before him!

"Oh, if we had only an excuse to call out your men and sweep those murderous scoundrels from the face of the earth!" he said. "I am sure they are my enemies, but how can I prove it?"

"Time works wonders," quietly responded Senor Cordoval. "I will put a scout upon their trail at once."

He stooped over the parapet and whistled, and a man who was making a lazo in the court below looked up.

"Come up here, Pedro."

The man laid down his lazo and ascended to the azotea. He proved to be a native Californian with a sallow face, sharp and cunning.

"You see those men, Pedro?" said his master, pointing to the party on the plain. "Take the glass and look at them."

The man obeyed and studied the party for five minutes. Then he returned the glass to Walter.

"You will know them when you see them again, Pedro?"

"Si, senor."

"You must follow them and when you have satisfied yourself where they are going bring me word at once. If you do your work well you will earn fifty dollars; if you do it ill—you know what will happen then."

The man shrugged his shoulders and rapidly descended from the roof and soon after they saw him leave the hacienda, admirably mounted, and ride away, making a great circle so as not to appear to have come from that direction. For half an hour the twelve remained in consultation and then Pedro rode out of a thicket and passed them quietly, without seeming to look at them.

"That fellow is a good scout," remarked the senor. "I have tried him in many ways and have not found him wanting. Ha; they are stopping him."

They saw Pedro halt and turn back and enter into conversation with the strangers. The conference was not of long duration and they separated, the twelve riding off toward the mountain-passes and Pedro keeping on his way. But, searching the ground carefully, Delisle saw him riding along the rocky bottom of a crevasse, keeping a course parallel with that taken by the band. All were lost to view behind the foothills and Walter laid the glass down.

"I fear that your scout, brave as he is, will be no match for the Dukites," said he. "I tell you, sir, that the Thugs of India are not their match in subtlety, and that wonderful race can not shed blood more coolly than they. You brush a fly from your face and kill it without thought; the Dukite brushes a man from his path as coolly and feels the crime as little. They are wonderful men and I have a great work to do to cope with them all."

"Is it not strange that they showed themselves to us so plainly?"

"They have some object in that, sir. When you see them again they will be as unlike what you have seen as possible, for they have ways of changing their appearance of which you and I know nothing. However, as they are gone I think it will be safe to go to Tampa City."

"We will go with a party and if your family have come we will have them up here at once. Hola, John Dean! Get nine of your fellows and prepare to ride with me to Tampa."

The one addressed—a muscular, wiry man of middle age, who was crossing the court-yard—looked up at the summons. It was the sort of face which you or I would like to see at our side in the tug of battle, strong, bold, self-reliant—the type of men who make the name of trapper and scout a terror to their savage enemies.

"All right, senior; any chance of a muss? I'm lit'rally spillin' fur a fight of some kind, an' I don't keer a dern who it ar with. I ain't snuffed out an Injun in—Lord love your heart—when did I raise any ha'r? It's a week, sartin."

"Get the men, John," replied the senior, laughing. "You may have a chance if you are careful of your opportunities."

"Anybody—a Chinaman, a Digger—I dunno but I'd even fight a Piute, I swar."

The man disappeared and in a remarkably short time a party of ten servitors—all of them desperate Indian-fighters—were gathered in the court below. They were armed with rifles, hatchets and long bowies. Revolvers had not yet come into general use and the Western man as a rule despised the pistol as a weapon. The senior and his companion descended and they rode away, the men laughing and jesting at the prospect of a fight.

"I'm a man that likes my employer," said John Dean; "but one thing he *must* do—he's got to give me a chance fur a fight now an' then or I spile. Whar' ar' we bound, senior?"

"We are going to Tampa."

"Waal, one thing we kin do, boys. You remember them plugs down to the mill laughed at us an' said we war sarvints. I reckon we'll hev to lick them, anyhow."

"Bet yer life, old hoss," responded the men.

"We'll make up a little party, somehow."

"Oh, them chaps are willin', ther the willin'-est lot I ever knowed in all my life, but we kin chaw 'em any day in the week—now you hear me. Whar's Pedro, senior? he's the only Greaser I ever knowed that c'd scout, an' he's a hull mule team on that, Pedro is."

"I've sent him on a scout, and no doubt he will meet us at Tampa."

"You orter hev let me go with him, senior. Pedro is good on the scout, but he kain't fight fur shucks; he's too cussed light, he is. What's that noise?"

They were riding through a pass under the shelter of an overhanging cliff. There was a rustling sound overhead, and the next moment, to their horror, a human body came whirling through the air, and struck the earth at their feet with a dull thud, the face turned up to the sky. At a glance they recognized Pedro, the Mexican scout. A long knife was driven to the hilt in his heart, pinning a paper to his breast, upon which Walter saw the fatal sign of the Dukites, the threatening serpent!

"You send your spies on the trail of the Dukites," cried a resounding voice. "This is the beginning of vengeance; the worst is yet to come."

The men flung themselves from their saddles and scaled the cliff, but when they reached the summit, no man was to be seen. The mark of the Red Dukite was set upon the first victim!

CHAPTER III.

JACK DEAN'S VISITOR.

JACK DEAN the stockman came down from the cliff with a dark scowl upon his hard face. In his rough way he had loved the Mexican because he was a man after his own heart—one who loved to take a trail and follow it to the end. An American upon the Pacific coast has little liking for a "Greaser," but in this case the attachment was deep and binding. Together they had trailed the Klamath, the Shasta and the Modoc in their mountain homes; and fighting under the shadow of so brave a man as Jack Dean, Pedro had been brave enough. Now he lay dead, the long thin strip of steel planted in his heart, and the flaming serpent, with its erected head, pinned upon his bosom.

"I heard him, the low cuss!" muttered the stockman. "Red Dukites they call themselves, eh? Does any man here know what that word means?"

"I can explain it," said Walter, who knew the wisdom of having such men as the stockman and his friends upon his side; and in as few words as possible he told why he had left the South Sea, and explained the working of the Dukites.

"Adzack'ly!" said Jack as he drew the blade from the bosom of the Mexican. "Here I swar that this blood shall never be wiped from the blade until the last of the twelve Dukites has gone under. Then it shall be buried, planted to the hilt in his heart."

"We foller suit, Jack," added the man who stood next to him. "What do you say, Sandy?"

"Hoot awa', child!" replied the man addressed—a genuine Scotchman with the red hair, powerful frame and "canny" ways of his race. "Dinna fash yersel' about me. Gin I leave Johnny Dean na doot I'm na better than a deed man. I'm wi' ye, soul an' body."

The rest clasped hands in silence; they needed no word to seal their faith.

"Then we are eleven and will match ourselves against the Dukites. For, when such brave men take up my quarrel it is but just that I should cast in my lot with theirs," cried Walter.

"He's a brave child!" spoke out Sandy McGregor, "an' na doot he'll mek a gallant fight against these dour deevils we maun fight wi'. I mind weel the day the last of the clan McCallum an' McGregor met, there was wigs on the heather that day. 'Blaw up yer chaunter, Sandy, an' gie them a taste of the 'Raut,' says the bonny chieftain. An' the pipes ne'er sounded so weel as they sounded that day, an' the wail rose in the McCallum cabins when the fight was done. Wae's me, the gude auld days lang syne!"

"Hold your pipes, Scotchy!" cried Jack Dean. "Mr. Delisle, you are our leader, mind, an' what you say we'll do. Shall we try to follow them now?"

"Better not, I think. I must get my father and family safe to the hacienda first."

"I'll take Pedro across the saddle and carry him. Poor lad; 'twas an unlucky day for him when you sent him out, senior. I was crazy fur a muss not an hour ago, and now—it's no use talkin'. Help me to lift him, Sandy."

The two raised the dead form of Pedro, and laid it on the horse and the party rode on. About a mile from Tampa they met one of the carts going to the hacienda, and the body was placed upon some straw and sent home. The party dashed into the open space in front of the hotel, where they were greeted with derisive cheers by the mill-men, who, for some reason, were "down" on the stockmen of Senor Cordoval. Jack Dean, for a wonder, paid no attention to these demonstrations, although at any other time he would have been ripe and ready for a fray.

"I kain't afford to git rubbed out now, 'boys," he said, quietly. "Take it easy; one of these days you'll sup on cold lead for this, but jest now I kain't throw away a chance. Only don't pile it on too thick or we mout forgit ourselves."

"That's the first time you ever took water, Jack Dean," said a burly mill-man who was seated on the rail of the veranda, "and with nine good boys at yer back it looks odd."

"Dave Carroll," answered Dean, "let me say a word to you. Our boys hev got some work to do that they must 'tend to, an' they kain't fight until it's done. One of our boys hev bin murdered, an' we ar' bound to hunt down the man that did it."

"You don't lay it to any of my crowd?" said Carroll, knitting his brows.

"Not a bit; we know who did it, an' it ain't any man you know, so don't git buffy on that. When we started out to-day we was fixed for a fight with you, but this throwed us off the track."

"Nuff sed," cried Carroll. "Boys, *cheese* that now; the one that picks on Jack Dean's crowd has got to fight me. It don't interfere with business when you hunt your man down, Jack?"

"In course not; I'll give the word when the work is done."

From that moment these rough men fraternized with the understanding that, at some future day, heads should be broken in a friendly way over the business. While this was going on the great lumbering stage drawn by six horses came into the "plaza" at a gallop, and the passengers began to alight. Mr. Delisle and Oscar were on the box and Don Estevan Cordoval, a handsome young man, richly dressed, handed out Mabel and Mrs. Delisle. Pat came down over the wheel, grinning widely as he recog-

nized his young master advancing through the crowd.

The arrival of the mail coach in a frontier town is an event, and the plaza was crowded. The driver, with the air of a man in authority, issued his orders to the hostlers with native grace, interlarding his remarks with a choice selection of American oaths. For the "native American" is gifted with a genius for profanity, deny it ye who will. Senor Cordoval was introduced to the family, and at once invited them to visit his hacienda.

"I think it best, father," said Walter. "Something has occurred which makes it necessary."

"Some more of your foolish fears," said Oscar. "I should be sorry to think you a coward, Walter Delisle."

"You at least have little cause to say so, Oscar," was the reply. "Run your eye over that paper which I received to-day, and then tell me if you still think I have not any cause for fear."

He placed in his brother's hand the paper which had fallen at his feet, pierced by the arrow, and even Oscar started and turned livid as he recognized the fatal sign.

"Those fellows must have the aid of the Evil One," he muttered, looking at his father, to whom Walter was explaining the steps he had taken. "I did think we should be safe here, at any rate. Well, father what is decided?"

"We go with Senor Cordoval, who has kindly placed his house at our disposal," replied Mr. Delisle. "You will understand it better when Walter has time to explain to you."

Oscar drew back, grumbling, and Estevan went away to order horses. In a few moments the party rode out of Tampa with five horsemen on each flank, and watching as they rode through the passes for some sign of their enemies. But the Dukites made no sign and the party rode into the court safe and sound, where the horses were taken in charge by men who came up at the motion of Cordoval's finger.

"You have a fine old place, senior," said Delisle, looking admiringly about him. "These historic spots have a rare interest for me, who have spent so many years literally an outcast, or rather an exile from my native land. But, why was it necessary to build these huge walls?"

"The Indian of the past is not the Indian of the present," was the reply. "The Indians of this region have sunk step by step until from a warlike race—the peer of the Comanches—they have dropped to their present level. In the days when these walls were built they were not too strong to resist the sudden attacks of the mountain tribes."

At this moment Zoraya, who had been waiting impatiently for them to come on, darted from the main entrance and threw herself into her brother's arms, which opened at once to receive her. No brother and sister ever loved more fondly than these two, and for a moment nothing was heard save the delicious sobs which joy wrung from the bosom of this sweet girl.

"There, there, *mio caro!*" said the young man, as he removed her clinging arms; "you forget that I must make you known to my friends. Walter you already know, but here I give you a lady friend—the one you have so long sighed for—Miss Mabel Delisle. You have heard me speak of Zoraya, often enough, Miss Delisle."

"So often that I already love her," replied Mabel. The impulsive child at once embraced and kissed her, and the two were fast friends. Mr. and Mrs. Delisle were warmly received, but as Zoraya placed her hand in the burning palm of Oscar a shudder passed through her frame. "I hope that our meeting is not prophetic, my dear sir," she said. "A shudder passed through me when I touched your hand; is there any meaning in it?"

For him—yes; the touch of that small white hand, the flash of those speaking eyes, had done their work. Oscar Delisle loved her with all the power of his fiery nature, and woe to any man who dared to cross his love! It was a passion at first sight—a consuming fire which would end in supreme happiness or utter misery. They entered the hacienda chatting merrily, but Oscar saw that it was by the side of Walter she walked, and that her face lighted up whenever he spoke.

"If he has dared!" he muttered between his set teeth. "If she should love him, the little affection I have for him would turn to undying hate. Let him beware!"

"I'd like to speak to Captain Delisle if he has the time," said Dean, who stood in the doorway as they passed through. Walter stopped at once and Mabel laughed merrily.

"Captain Delisle? Ha, ha, ha! You have received your promotion suddenly, brother."

"You may laugh if you like, Mabel, but I am proud of the title, for it makes me the leader of brave men. Go on, sister; I will join you in a moment."

The party passed on into the reception-room, leaving Walter with the stockman.

"Now, look here, Cap," said Dean, in a tone of expostulation; "you must take keer of yerself. Wimmie are the devil! I guess I orter know fur I've hed four wives in my time an' every cussed one made it mighty hot fur me. A burnt child dreads the fire; don't you hev nothin' to say to 'em."

"What do you mean, Jack?" said Walter, laughing heartily.

"Never you mind; ef you don't know now I ain't going to tell you. What I want ter say is this yer—you ar' captin of our party an' we've got work to do, an' I don't want you to go throwin' away time on a pesky girl. Not but Zoraya ar' a buster an' a mighty nice little gal, but she'll draw you off the track ef you don't take keer."

A hot flush mounted into the handsome face of Walter Delisle. This rough stockman had penetrated his secret at a glance and knew how deeply he was interested in the pretty little Californian.

"That's another thing, Cap—don't git mad with me—but in two weeks' time thet brother of yours will be fit to take your life out of jealousy; he will, by jinks."

"Oscar?"

"You bet ye—Oscar. I never see a man look at a gal as he did at Zoraya, an' he's got a nasty black drop of blood in his veins som'ers or other."

"Don't be troubled about me, Jack. While those twelve men live there is no safety for any of us, and I never put my hand to the plow and look back. I'll stand by you to the end."

"Nuff sed," was the reply. "I'll go to my hut now, fur I know you'll keep yer word."

Jack Dean left the hacienda and rode quickly across the plain to the stock-hut where he slept. It was close to one of the main corrals, and he dismounted, took off his saddle and bridle and let his horse run loose, for he knew that the trained animal would not stray far from the place and would come at his whistle. Two of his friends were seated at a little table, deep in the mysteries of "draw poker," and a rather pretty Mexican woman, Jack Dean's fourth, was engaged in preparing supper.

"Evenin', boys, evenin'! How's the luck?"

"The chiel has strapped me!" answered Sandy McGregor, as his opponent raked the pile on four kings. "He's a douce laddie, and I'm sair afraid he keepit some cairds in his sleeve."

Jack laughed and the men drew back from the table, at which sign Mrs. Dean put on the dishes and prepared the evening meal. They went to work in a hungry fashion, Sandy performing in a wonderful manner. Then the table was cleared away, Mrs. Dean began to tinkle a guitar and the men were sitting down to cards when they heard the beat of hoofs and some one rattled on the door with a whip-stock.

"Open the door, *carissima*!" said Dean. "Cospetto! Who can it be at this time of night?"

The door swung back on its leathern hinges and the light of the lamp fell upon a tall man mounted on a long-limbed horse. He was bending forward to look into the room.

"Can I get to stay here all night, stranger?" he said.

"We've got mighty cluss quarters here, stranger," answered Jack. "Why don't you go to the hacienda?"

"I don't take much stock in *big bugs*," replied the man. "I can camp down anywhere, you know—the floor is good enough for me. Or if you don't want me in the cabin I can camp on the grass, but I'd like to toast a piece of venison at your fire."

"You ar' welcome to what we've got, stranger," replied Jack. "I kin give you a blanket on the floor."

"Good enough for me. I'll picket my horse out on the grass and come in."

Mrs. Dean put the remains of their supper on a little table and when the stranger came in he accepted her invitation to partake, in the off-hand way peculiar to the prairie man. When he had finished he lighted his pipe and drew up to the table to watch their game. Jack, who was looking at him intently, could not but admire the muscular frame of the man, who was wonderfully strong of limb.

"Take a hand, stranger?" he said.

"Don't care, though I don't know the game

very well, but I'm always willing to risk dollar for dollar."

The cards were dealt and for a few games the stranger lost, playing rashly and risking his money on weak hands. Then the luck began to change and he won steadily, until the three friends found their funds running low. As the stranger leaned forward to take his winnings his sleeve caught upon a corner of the table and stripped the cotton shirt above his elbow before he really knew what he had done, and the keen eyes of Jack Dean saw, imprinted upon the arm, the fatal sign of the Red Dukite! Quicker than thought a bare bowie was at the throat of the stranger, while Sandy McGregor seized his arms and pinioned them behind him.

"I reckon you've got to the end of your rope, Mr. Dukite," growled Jack. "Curse on your bloody heart, I'll teach you to come into my ranch."

"Do you want to rob me?" demanded the stranger, coolly. "I thought I had got among poor honest men."

"And so you hev, stranger, an' I judge it ar' company thet don't agree with you. Will you tell us what that mark on your arm means?"

"The mark?" demanded the stranger.

"You bet!"

"I don't know what there is in a mark on a man's arm that you should jump on him like tigers."

"I've been all over the world and I got that mark in the South Seas. A native put it on my arm for me but I never supposed my life would be in danger on that account. Do you murder every sailor you find with an anchor on his arm?"

"You play the game down mighty fine, boss," said Jack Dean, without lowering his weapon.

"What did your native call the sar-pint, might I be so bold ez to ask?"

"The Red Dukite."

"You've got the same mighty pat," said Jack, slowly. "See here; I'm goin' to take you up to the hacienda and show you to Walter Delisle. Ef he don't know you I reckon we'll let you loose."

"You are very kind," replied the man. "I don't recognize your authority in any way, but you are stronger than I am. I will go quietly."

"You promise that?"

"Yes."

Sandy McGregor, obeying a sign from Jack, released the arms of the stranger which he had drawn over the back of a chair in a very awkward manner. The fellow rose quietly and drew down his torn sleeve which he buttoned again. This done he called for his coat which was handed to him by Jack Dean, who helped him to put it on, laying his bowie on the table while he did so. The other men were looking on carelessly when they saw Jack go down under a blow which would have felled an ox, and the next moment the stranger, whirling the bowie above his head, sprung through the open door. They ran for their rifles, but when they reached the door the beat of flying hoofs, and a wild, exultant shout told them that their guest had escaped. It was nearly five minutes before Jack recovered his senses sufficiently to sit up and then it was with a swimming in his head and a deadly faintness which quickly compelled him to lie down again.

"I've been licked by a mule," he said, faintly—"been blowed up in a steamer, shot through the right lung, been in twenty-two airtquakes, been bucked forty feet above the back of a Mexican plug; but such a crack as that I never experienced in all my life. It's just awful and no mistake. Whar is he?"

"The daft callant gaed awa' like a whirlwind," exclaimed McGregor. "Hoot, men, but ye s'ud ha'e seen him flee awa' over the grass! Deed, mon, but he's no canny, that chiel wi' the snake."

"It's only one thing more against him," said Jack. "I say, Scotchy; take my horse and ride to the hacienda and warn 'em to take care. Call out Walter an' let him know first."

"I'm no sae sure it w'd be safe to gang noo," replied the prudent Scot. "They've gude strang walls to fend them an' we have none. Gin the daft body came back wi' mair help wud ye do then?"

"Never mind me, Sandy. I'll be all right in an hour's time."

"Let Billy gang; he'd be ower glad to get a blink out of the een of the young leddy's maid. Ye mind her, Billy; she g'e yer hairt a sair blow."

"I don't care if I go," confessed Billy. "Can you whistle the horse up, Jack?"

The injured man raised his fingers to his lips

and emitted a sharp whistle which was answered by the neigh of the trained horse, which came bounding back a moment later. Billy Blake loaded his rifle, swung himself into the saddle and rode away at a swinging pace. He was a gallant young fellow and had little fear of the ordinary dangers of the border for he had a strong arm, was a dead shot and knew that he bestrode one of the best horses in California. The night was not dark and objects could be easily seen at a distance of two hundred feet. The young stockman rode on at a brisk trot until he saw a dark form start up suddenly from the grass before him and run on rapidly. He urged his horse, but to his utter surprise his utmost effort did not suffice to decrease the distance between them.

"Halt, there; I want to whisper in your ear, stranger."

But the dark figure still ran on before him, and if anything gained upon the horse.

"If I shoot you'll come down, my boy," cried Billy. "You'd better pull up, now mind, I tell you."

A mocking laugh was the only response, and that dark figure still fled on before him through the gloom of the night. Billy leveled his rifle but it was not in his nature to shoot a man in the back, and he again called out in a tone of warning.

"Turn back you," was the reply. "If you follow me, you come to your death."

"You will have it," cried Blake. "When you pass yonder tree, I will fire."

The man kept up his headlong pace, but, just as he reached the fatal tree he paused, and his hand went back over his shoulder. Even in the moonlight Blake saw something leave his hand and fly out before him. Mechanically he halted and followed the dark object with his eye, when there came a whistling sound and the dark object, which was nothing more nor less than a boomerang, struck him just above the eyes with terrible force and he was stretched senseless on the plain. The fleet-footed enemy came back and placed his hand on the bosom of the fallen man. He could feel no pulsation beneath his palm.

"Dead! We will teach them what it is to follow the trail of the Dukites."

When morning broke, its rays fell upon the still, cold face of William Blake, a bloody mark upon his brow and on his breast the fatal sign of the serpent! The Red Dukite had again placed its sting in the breast of a victim.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MIDNIGHT ASSASSINS.

THE hacienda De Cordoval was wrapped in the mantle of silence. Not a light gleamed in a window, not a step sounded in the long corridors or in the lofty rooms. All had retired to rest—Mabel sharing the couch of Zoraya, who would not be parted from her new friend. Her apartment was upon the second floor, a spacious chamber overlooking the gardens at the back. In the dead hour of night, when the two beautiful girls who had talked themselves into slumber lay clasped in each other's arms, the golden locks of Mabel mingled with those of her darker sister, a hand was laid upon the gauze curtains, drawing them gently aside, and a dark, sinister face looked down upon the sleeping pair. The moonlight falling upon that face added to its devilish beauty, for it was the face of Lucifer after the fall.

"I could wring their proud hearts to the quick," he thought, as he lifted a thin-bladed knife which he carried in his right hand, "but even I, sworn as I am to evil, could not look in their faces and strike. Ha! she wakes! Sleep—I command it!"

He stretched out his hand and made a few passes over the head of Mabel, who had partly started from the couch, and she again fell back, utterly powerless before the will of this wonderful man.

"So the strong conquers the weak," he muttered. "Would the charm work with Walter Delisle? If it would—which I doubt—our work would be done this night. But, I know that in his breast is a will more powerful even than mine, which will neither bend nor break. If I conquer him, it can only be with my dagger in his heart."

For full five minutes the man stood looking down upon the sleeping maidens, who had remained subject to his will. There was an expression of doubt in his face as he looked at Mabel Delisle. You might almost call it love, so strong was it.

"We have the power to spare one and one only of this fated family. If I have any voice it shall be you, fear not, sweet girl. I would

give the best years of my life to know that our work was done and that she would love me. Then in yonder sunny isle—but I dream and my work is still to be done."

A low hiss called him and he left the room silently, leaving the girls wrapped in slumber. He had willed that they should sleep for five hours and then awake, freed from the mesmeric influence he had thrown about them. In the passage he met a second man who had warned him by the serpent hiss that there was work to do.

"Speak," he said. "The girls will not wake."

"Senor Cordoval sleeps in the chamber which opens into the library on the ground floor. Our hated enemy is in the room at the right of the main entrance. We can reach him first if we will."

"He is reserved for a worse fate; go on."

"Mr. Delisle and his wife occupy rooms at the lower end of this passage. Estevan Cordoval sleeps opposite, and Walter—"

"What of him? Is he alone too?" hissed the man who seemed to be the leader.

"Yes; he sleeps at the back of the main salon. If you wish to justify him, now is the accepted time."

By way of answer the man pressed the cold blue steel blade to his lips and signed to the other to lead on. He too had drawn a dagger like that carried by his companion, the handle of which represented the coiled body of the Dukite. There could be no question but that these were the chosen avengers who had followed the Delisles from their island home. As they passed through the long halls each man covered his face with a crape mask. They passed down the staircase, their feet awaking no echoes upon the stained floors, pushed open the door of the main salon, and crept in silently. The door of the bedroom stood partly open and the Dukites paused and looked in, while the leader, touching himself upon the breast, signified that he would strike first. They approached the bed with the blue blades glittering in the moonlight raised above their heads. Walter lay there sleeping, his broad breast rising and falling with each respiration. But these men, recognizing in him the most powerful bar to their designs against Oscar, never thought of pity. The bright blades glittered in the moonlight and the strong right hand of the avenger descended. There was a sharp metallic ring and the blade was shivered to the very hilt upon the concealed vest which Walter Delisle, living as he had in constant danger of the assassin's dagger, had learned to wear night and day. He was upon his feet instantly with a sword in his hand—for he always kept arms beside him in his bed. The weapon was one of those frail but pointed blades which are manufactured especially for the use of "Knights Templar," of which body Walter was an active member. As he sprang from the bed he lunged out and the hilt knocked against the breast-bone of the second assassin who was springing upon him with the design of stabbing him in the throat. The man uttered a hollow groan and dropped dead at the feet of the slayer, who, without attempting to remove the blade, snatched up a bowie from the table by his bed, and uttering a shout to alarm the house, sprang upon the man who had struck him first. But, that wily villain had seen how useless it was for him to struggle against a man clothed in mail, and springing back had closed the door so quickly that the blow which was launched at his back was arrested by the wood through which the heavy bowie passed as if it had encountered paper. By this time the house was in an uproar. Servants variously armed were pouring down from the dormitories and Don Estevan and Senor Cordoval rushed in with swords in their hands to find Walter bending over the body of the man whom he had pierced through the lung.

"Search the court-yard; send out horsemen to scour the prairie about the hacienda," cried Walter. "I have made this one safe, but one has escaped."

The dying man made a feeble effort to strike him in the breast with his dagger, but the weak blow hardly penetrated the cloth and touched the mail.

"Curse the mail vest!" hissed the baffled assassin. "But for that the strongest enemy of the 'elected twelve' would now be dead with the sign of vengeance over his heart. Beware the eleven who still live—but most of all beware of the chief!"

He grasped the bloody handle of the sword with both hands, and tried to draw it from the wound, but the effort was vain. Walter laid his hand upon the sword and stopped his hand.

"Not yet; I know enough of wounds to be sure that when that blade is removed your life goes with it. Who are your companions, and where is their secret haunt?"

"Yes, dog," hissed Oscar, who by this time was in the room, "speak before I tear you limb from limb."

"Whatever happens to the elected twelve you at least are doomed, murderer of our brother. I spit at you, and laugh you to scorn."

By a mighty effort he tore the blade from the gaping wound, a great gush of black blood followed, and the first of the elected twelve lay dead at their feet.

"A most determined villain," said Senor Cordoval. "If the other eleven have this man's determined courage, and I do not doubt it, it will not be an easy task to defeat them."

"They are villains, it is true," replied Walter Delisle, "and I have escaped them twice by great good fortune; but they are as brave men as any now upon the earth. Why should they not be—men of all countries and all creeds, banded together with two objects, that of personal ambition and the good of the brotherhood. I should have said one object, for every personal feeling sinks into insignificance in their eyes compared with the wants of the order. I tell you, sir, that this order is grand in its conceptions, were it not it lacks one thing which has made another order glorious."

"And that—"

"Is 'charity toward all mankind.' But, what shall we do with this body—for the ladies must not see it?"

"The men are coming back," was the reply of Senor Cordoval. "I hope that they have caught the other."

"Never think it, sir," replied Walter. "A Dukite always provides for his escape, and if he is not cut down in the beginning he will get clear."

Some of the men came in hastily, and announced that not the slightest trace of the Dukite was to be seen. In some way unknown, he had seemed to vanish from off the face of the earth. Senor Cordoval told them to take up the dead form of the Dukite and bury it upon the plain outside the walls. Walter had thought it strange that, in this tumult in the building, nothing had been heard from Zoraya and Mabel, and one of the maids sent up to their room soon returned and announced that they were sleeping, and her utmost efforts could not rouse them.

"Go up to them, mother," cried Walter, deeply agitated. "See if there is anything wrong, as I much fear. Perhaps they have been drugged—the Dukites understand drugs better than any men on earth."

Mrs. Delisle left the room in great haste, and hurried up to the chamber in which the girls slept. As she looked at their faces she started, and turning hastily, sent a servant after Walter whom she met at the door.

"Unless I am very much mistaken you will understand this," she said. "Come in and look at them."

Walter entered and looked into the silent faces.

"Mesmerism!" he cried, turning pale, "and we have driven away the man who made them sleep."

"It is a question of power of will, is it not, my dear Walter?"

"Yes; the strongest will rules the weaker. If his will is stronger than mine I cannot wake them; if mine is most powerful his will must bend to it. I will make the trial first on Mabel. Mabel!"

The girl did not stir, but a singular expression flitted across her face.

"You have been put to sleep by a strong man but his will must bow to mine. He has told you to sleep; I command you to wake."

She started slightly and muttered brokenly and again sunk back. Walter compressed his lips, and laid his hand upon her forehead with a strong pressure.

"Wake, Mabel; I will it!"

There was a violent struggle in the mind of the sleeping girl. The powerful will already in possession of her intellect struggled hard for the mastery, but a still more powerful opposed it. A moment more and Mabel started up, looking wildly about her.

"Where is he? what has happened? Ah, is it you, dear Walter?"

"I am here, my dear girl. Be calm and tell me what you have seen, if you will."

"A man stood there looking at me, and when I was about to cry out he commanded me to sleep."

"Did you see his face?"

"I cannot recall it, but it seems to me that I should know it in my sleep."

"That is enough for the present. I imagine that it will not require so strong an effort to awake Zoraya as my will has conquered his."

He touched Zoraya lightly on the forehead and commanded her to awake, and seeing that her eyes were opening he at once left the chamber, accompanied by the servants who were without the curtains.

"It seems strange that you should go into that room," hissed an angry voice in his ear. He looked up and saw Oscar looking at him in a threatening manner.

"I don't think you know what you are talking about," replied the young man, coolly. "Mother sent me and it was needed, for both Mabel and Zoraya were in a deep sleep."

"Pshaw. A capital excuse, I should think. Mother is always on your side, and I should be glad to know by what right you call the senora by her first name."

"A slip of the tongue, certainly," replied the young man, laughing. "But, once for all, no other man in this house could have roused them from that sleep, and I believe that no other man in the world could have done so. Laugh if you will, but it is so."

"You must not cross my path in this as you have everything else in life," cried Oscar, with a fierce look. "If you do, we be to you."

"I believe that you are going crazy, upon my honor. I will not talk with you any more upon the subject until you are master of yourself, as you certainly are not now. Don't you see that the servants are looking at you?"

Oscar drew back and Walter went down to the lower floor, where he found the rest of the gentlemen in close consultation.

"We must open the campaign at once," said Senor Cordoval. "I am not the man to allow my house to be invaded in this way, nor will I endure it. To-morrow fifty men will be in the saddle to commence the search."

"You will look in vain, then," said Walter, "but, take your own way."

The morning came and as its first rays shone upon the earth the band rode out at the hacienda gates in gallant array. When they reached the place where they had buried the Dukite, the night before, they found only an empty hole, the fresh earth about it bearing the marks of many feet. Walter pointed to the opening as a proof of what he had said.

"They have taken away the body to bury it according to their rites," he said. "We shall look for them in vain."

At this moment they were joined by the Scotchman and Jack Dean, whom they meant to take up at their cabin. The latter bore upon his saddle in front the motionless form of Billy Blake, whom he had found upon the plain.

"One more count against the Dukites!" fairly howled the stockman. "Are you ready to march?"

CHAPTER V.

THE BURIAL BY FIRE.

In the heart of the mountains nature had scooped out a deep bowl, the bottom a tangled mass of pines and dense shrubbery of mountain growth. A deep, dismal place in which the foot of man had rarely rested—a place from which the Indian shrunk with holy horror for he knew that the bad spirits of the mountains dwelt in this dismal spot. Even the miners in the search for gold avoided the locality for they saw little hope for them in the dry bottom where there was neither water nor quartz. The Shastas and other Indian tribes had seen the spirits which inhabited the place and feared them.

It is night, dark, lonely night, the clouds hiding the face of the moon; a single man comes stealing down the mountain side and disappears among the pines; there follows an interval of silence; then another man passes. In this way ten forms go down the mountain-side and are hidden by the pines. Half an hour later a single man, tall and strong, goes down the path alone and no one follows him.

Eleven!

The number of the Red Dukites since one has fallen upon the sword of Walter Delisle at the hacienda. A single spark of light is seen gleaming like a star threading its way in an erratic manner among the trees. Suddenly it goes out and all is darkness in the deep vale. Then a twelfth man comes stealing down the mountain and is lost among the pines.

Who is it that dares follow on the Dukites' trail, in their secret haunts?

A great cave, the roof hung with stalactites of rare beauty. A few fires in the midst of

the vast room making it glorious in its beauty. In a circle about the fire, near which stands a heap of resinous pines covered by a blood-red cloth, eleven men are seated in a circle. Each wears a mask and a white robe, upon the breast of which is worked, in red, the fatal serpent sign, and in the red belt above the waist is seen the slender dagger with the handle. Only one has no dagger and that one is the chief, who is seated high above the rest wearing a sort of helmet, upon the front of which are three words in an unknown tongue.

"Are all here?" demanded the chief, in a deep tone.

"All," responded the brethren.

"We were twelve," continued the chief; "I see but ten brothers of the serpent before me. Where is the twelfth?"

"Here!" cried one of the brethren, throwing off the red cloth from the heap of pine which was indeed a funeral-pile. Upon this heap, clothed in the robes of the Dukite but without a mask, lay the man who had been slain by Walter Delisle. The blood which had been drained from him by his terrible wound had left his face of the color of impure wax, but there was a certain majesty in his appearance, even in the repose of death.

For, notwithstanding the fact that his had been a life full of evil and violence, it was a bold face—that of a man who had not yet reached his thirtieth year. The eleven looked at the still face for a moment, and then each covered his eyes, crying out:

"Woe, woe, woe, to the accursed race! Death to our enemies! In this world woe, in the world to come—torments!"

"I must speak and tell how this happened," the chief said. "We two were deputed to put to death Walter Delisle. Fate has been against us and we have failed, utterly. I went first to the cabin of the stockman, Dean. In playing cards my sleeve caught upon the rough table, and the serpent sign was revealed. I was taken but escaped by stratagem, dealing Dean a blow which he will remember for days to come. My companion was on the alert, and watched the cabin. Soon he saw the younger of the three men leave it to warn the people at the hacienda that we were on the track. He ran on before the horse, and when he had tempted the young man near enough, threw a boomerang and brought him down. We climbed a tree at the south-west angle of the hacienda wall, dropped our ladder into the courtyard, and descended easily enough and entered the house. I put the spell of sleep upon the young girls while he pointed to the body—'discovered the place in which they all slept. Then we struck at Walter, but he wears a vest under his shirt. Remember, if you strike at him to strike him in the throat. He seized a sword and killed my friend, and I fled, for the house was already in confusion. How they buried our brother and we raised and brought him here, you already know. If I have not done well—if I have failed in any thing, each brother has a dagger, and my breast is bare."

"You have done well, oh chief," responded the solemn voices of the ten brothers. "No man could do more, and we are commanded to flee when there is no hope."

"Enough, then. Let us take counsel, here above the dead form of the man we have loved, and who has died for us. It was decided to slay Walter Delisle first. Let us see if we can not first torture this hated race in other ways. I have not been idle, and have both seen and heard much which will do us good. First, we know that the father and Walter Delisle love Mabel dearly. If any thing were to happen to her, it would cause them great agony."

"It is good; let their hearts be wrung to the core."

"Zoraya Cordoval is beautiful. The first glance of her eyes has made the two brothers love her, and they are already at daggers' points. Let us stir up strife between them, and I know that there is evil enough in the heart of Oscar Delisle to cause him to kill even a brother if he stands in the way. If we could do this it would be well."

A murmur of approval passed through the circle at this refinement of vengeance, and a clapping of hands was heard.

"I ask you then, brothers, whether it would not be better to drop violence until they sink into repose, and work upon those loves and hates? While they stay here, and fifty men are ready to spring into the saddle when Walter Delisle lifts his hand, we can do little. Why not send out four men, the most subtle among us, to worm their way into the confidence of our enemies and wait the time to strike a blow?"

There was a hurried conference among the ten, and then one of them spoke up quickly:

"I speak for the brethren. Let the chief name those to do the work."

"Number three, four and eight are the men I have chosen and I also will go. To number three I give the work of betraying the maidens."

"I accept the work," replied a melodious voice, "and I will not fail to do my work well."

"Accepted and recorded. Number four I give the task of working among the stockmen, because he has lived among them. These fools think that the Dukites dwell only in the South Seas, but we know that their members dwell in many lands, and are ready to do the work of the order."

"I obey," answered number four.

"Accepted and recorded. To number eight I give Walter Delisle, and it is a dangerous mission, for he is a man worthy of the name, whom it is not easy to deceive. You accept, number eight?"

"I do."

"Record it. As for me, I have chosen my work, and while I retain a general supervision over the actions of the others, my work is with Oscar Delisle. You shall see him wrought up to that pitch of fury that he shall be ready to stain his hands in his brother's blood. If I can accomplish that you will say that I have done well?"

"We will," responded the robed brothers. "We know you, and what you promise you will be sure to perform."

"Once more I say to the rest, keep close. You need any thing, you are unknown in Tampa, and any one of you can go for what you want. The means to buy it lie at your feet in the wealth of this strange valley, where gold may be had by simply picking the nuggets of the soil. Number three, I have chosen you in place of my dead friend."

"And I will be as true to you as he was," responded the same melodious voice. "Great chief, you have only to command and your servant will obey. Only let me warn you to beware of one thing, the love of the profane. It is written in our laws that none of the Dukites may wed outside the society."

"Why do you say that?" demanded the chief in a changed voice.

"Zoraya Cordoval is beautiful—"

"I could kill her without mercy."

"And Mabel Delisle: what of her?"

"Say no more or you may go too far. As for Zoraya she is the magnet by which I will draw both Oscar Delisle and his brother to their fate. Yet I would give much to know that Walter Delisle was a sworn brother, for with his will joined to mine we could make the world bow down before us. I do not wish to say it, but he is stronger even than I. You remember I told you that I had put the sleep spell upon the maidens?"

"Yes."

"Last night, long before the hour I had appointed for their waking, I felt his will struggling with mine for the possession of these maidens. I fought hard, first for Mabel and then for Zoraya, but I was vanquished and felt them pass away from me. Had I been upon the spot with my eye upon the sleepers, and my hands weaving the mystic signs above them, I know not who would have been victorious, but he is conqueror now. Silence all!"

He raised his hand above his head, and made a sign which all understood. In an instant the band were scattered in confusion, and the chief stood with a single companion, the man known as "number three," beside the dead form of the Dukite.

"You felt it too, great chief?" murmured the sweet voice of his companion. "Be at ease; it will not be long before the brothers bring good tidings."

The eyes of the chief gleamed like stars through his mask. The minutes passed slowly by, the fire burned low, when there came a confused sound of hurrying feet in the passage which led to the outer world, and a man with every mark of abject terror upon his face, broke into the lighted cave where he was at once seized by the strong hands of the chief, and hurled to the earth.

"To me, Dukites!" shouted the chief. "I have him safe."

The men poured into the room and the prisoner was seized and dragged into the circle of light, which, falling on his face, revealed one of the stockmen of Cordoval, a half-breed Shasta. His face was literally convulsed with terror, for, although a skillful scout he had a cowardly heart.

"You have dared to act the spy on the coun-

cils of the Serpent Brotherhood!" hissed the chief, "and you have come in time. They who struggle with the serpent may find themselves in his coils before they are aware. Who sent you to spy upon us?"

"Mercy, mercy; I could not help it, for they swore to kill me if I did not come."

"They—who are they?"

"Senor Cordoval, Jack Dean and the rest. Do not kill me and I will join you; I will be your friend if you will only spare my life."

"The Red Dukites want no cowards among them," was the chilling reply. "My brothers, you have heard it said that our brothers sleep more peacefully if we lay beneath them the yet warm body of an enemy. The Spirit whom we serve knows our wants and has given this coward into our hands. Who has a dagger?"

Ten blades gleamed in the light of the lamp and the spy sunk under twenty stabs, bleeding at every pore. He did not struggle, for many of the keen blades had been sheathed in his heart. They lifted the yet quivering body, and while some removed the form of their friend, the spy was laid upon the funeral pile beneath him, when the other was replaced and then the band marched in solemn procession about the pile, singing a funeral dirge in a strange tongue. Three times they made a circuit of the pile, when the chief applied a torch and the resinous heap at once burst into flame. The Brahmin's wife, who threw herself upon her husband's funeral-pile was not more devout in her sorrows than these strange men. The murder they had just done was nothing to them—it was a duty, necessary to appease the manes of their departed friend. With them there was only one vengeance, the blow of the dagger, and life was an empty mockery at the best. Solemn and slow the funeral dirge rose about the pile as the white-robed men, still holding their bloody daggers, circled about the death-pile. The terrible heat consumed the two forms, and when the solemn march was ended and the fire was gone out they marched about a little heap of ashes smoking on the floor, all that remained of the half-breed spy and the first man that had fallen of that terrible band.

CHAPTER VI.

MYSTIC VOICES.

THE avengers of Billy Blake and Pedro were in the foothills, eagerly searching for traces of their enemies. Walter had little hope that they would succeed, but as they were determined to take the command and the search commenced. The half-breed alone of all the scouts sent out struck the true trail, and we have seen how little he gained. His ashes mingled with those of the fated "number twelve" in the mountain cave. No other trace of their enemies could be found and the scouts came in, one by one, utterly disheartened.

"We'll have to give it up, I'm afraid," said Jack Dean. "The skunks have found out that it ar' too hot for 'em an' hev dug out."

"That is not my opinion," replied Walter, "but while there is a well-organized company like ours upon their track you will see nothing of the Dukites. My advice is to turn to the hacienda and keep the scouts at work until they have a trace."

"I don't know but you ar' right, Cap, but I hate orfully to be beat. I'd give all the dust I've got for a lick at that skunk that came to my cabin."

"You will have a chance yet. The Dukites never forgive nor forget, and you will hear from them again before many days. You may be sure of this. Are all the men in?"

"That half-breed Justin ain't here, but I don't set much store by him, an' he may never come back. He's a cowardly hound, anyway."

"That makes no difference here," rejoined Walter. "He is one of us and as such he is worth waiting for. We will give him five hours. In the mean time, let the scouts be at work."

The search was fruitless. Old mountaineers as they were, not one of the men knew anything of the existence of the cave which held the Dukite secret. As the five hours drew nigh to close the men came in, one by one, until all save Justin stood in the silent glade.

"It's no use," protested Jack Dean. "I did think the half-breed had got skeered an' pegged out, but now I don't think it: the cussid Dukites have got their claws on him."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared a voice under their feet. "They follow the Dukites, they dare follow the Elected Avengers! Ha, ha, ha!"

The camp was in confusion, and the stockmen, starting to their feet, looked wild and alert.

them in search of the owner of the mysterious voice. They clambered up the rocks and searched in the crevices, but nothing rewarded their search.

"Dig for us!" cried the same voice. "Delve into the bowels of the mountains if you would find the haunts of the Red Dukites. You are drones—you are fools! Where is the half-breed, Justin? Where is Billy Blake? Where is Pedro, the Mexican scout? Let all men who follow us beware!"

"Hold me, some chap!" howled Jack Dean, as he danced wildly about on the rocks. "I'm so durned mad I know I shall bu'st. I feel it in my bones. Oh, let me once get my claws on you and won't I make you sweat blood for this!"

"Ha, ha, ha; Jack Dean, do you remember the blow I gave you in your cabin on the night when Billy Blake was killed? Does your head ache? Is the land of the Red Dukite heavy?"

"Oh, come and see me!" bawled Dean. "Come all at once, the hull darned caboodle, an' I'll make the liveliest time you ever heard tell of."

"We are not fools," was the reply. "You have commenced the search for the Dukites, and we laugh at you. When you find us we shall know it. When you can burrow in the earth like moles and dive into the sea without harm, then you can cope with the Red Dukites."

"I'll match you yet, you red fiends," yelled Dean, as the voices seemed to recede before him. "Come out and face us."

Mocking laughter was the only response and the stockmen again began a frantic search of the rocks in the hope that some opening might be found. There was one crevice from which a thin smoke slowly rose, and they searched it without avail for a large opening. This smoke might arise from a dozen causes, and yet Walter was in doubt.

"Boot and saddle, boys," he said, after a moment's thought. "I begin to think that we are no match for the Dukites on their own ground, and this business really puzzles me. They have got hold of Justin in some way, and I have no doubt that he is dead already, for they never spare an enemy once in their hands unless he is worthy to be one of them, when they place every inducement before him. I, myself, if I had yielded to their demands, would at this moment be a chief among them, if not the chief."

"Did they want you?" cried Senor Cordoval. "That is very strange as they hate you so much. I am really very much in doubt as to what they mean, by making you such a proposition."

"Yet the man who proposed it placed before me riches and power if I would join them. He proved to me, beyond a doubt, that these promises could be fulfilled, and I have no doubt they would have been if I had yielded."

"Pshaw!" sneered Oscar. "How you do wish to be regarded as a man of unspeakable virtue, Wallie. Every man has his price. The choice of riches and honor before you, you would have chosen as any other man."

"In other words—" began Walter, with a quickening pulse, his hands convulsively clinched as he faced his brother.

"Silence, Oscar!" cried the father, as the young man was about to retort. "If you open your lips I disown and disinherit you, and you know that what I promise, I fulfill."

Oscar stopped, a flash of furious passion on his face. He knew his father well and that if he dared speak he would be disinherited from that hour. Yet furious passion was tugging at his heart, and he was in a mood to commit almost any act. His eyes, with him the best index of his intense passion, turned bloodshot. An en-sanguined mist swam before them and for a moment he was literally a madman.

"You were about to insult your brother, Oscar," said the father, quickly, "and it was time that I interfered. You must remember that I know that Walter speaks the truth. Did he not show me the letter he received?"

"A letter!" sneered Oscar. "Let it pass, father; I won't say anything to bring down the pride of your pet. How long are we going to stay fooling here? Our astute young captain does not seem to accomplish much."

"Hear us, Oscar Delisle!" cried the hollow voice beneath their feet. "You have committed three crimes which in themselves alone deserve death. You have murdered a man who had done you no wrong—like a coward, firing before the time."

"Liar!" shrieked Oscar.

"You know it is true, you villain. You have robbed an old man of a treasure which he valued more than life itself, for it was his all."

"Again you lie!" screamed Oscar. "I have not done this, and you only say it because you hate me."

"It is as true as the records of the Dukites," replied the voice, "and you deny it because you wish to appear well in the eyes of Senor Cordoval. Fool! Do you think that Zoraya will care for you when Walter loves her?"

A look of shame mingled with rage appeared upon the face of Oscar Delisle. He gasped for breath and his hands opened and closed in a convulsive way.

"It tears your proud heart to have this known, base dog!" cried the invisible Dukite. "I can see your face full of deadly pain, and know that you are almost ready to take your brother's life. Liar, you seek to deny that we would have loved your brother if he had loved us. It is false; we would have made him our chief, would have placed him, with the consent of the greatest among us, even above him who is now our chief."

A hiss like that of a serpent came from the closed lips of the tortured man, and the Dukites laughed in chorus.

"You demons, you hounds! Oh, to be among you for a moment, sword in hand."

"You are not yet appointed to die, Oscar Delisle. When the time comes we will give you the rest you seek. Where is Mary Vanverne, the beautiful maid of Tasmania? Who was her destroyer and sent her to rest under the salt sea? Who but Oscar Delisle, the white curse of the South Seas?"

Great heaven, Oscar!" cried Mr. Delisle, in a voice of wonder, "what do these charges mean?"

"Do you wish to have me swear upon the holy book, that these charges are false? They are, and my word ought to be enough. But if you require it I will swear."

"I remember Mary Vanverne, a beautiful girl, and wondered what had become of her. If you have injured that beautiful child you shall rue it," cried Walter.

"A moment since when I doubted your boasting words, my father interfered with threats of disinheritance. Now when you offer me a deeper insult he is silent."

"Because I fear that there is cause for the accusation," groaned the elder Delisle. "Who was the man you killed, whom you said was a Dukite? The brother of Mary Vanverne, the White Maid of Tasmania, as brave a youth as ever trod the earth. Where was Mary last seen? With you, upon the sea-shore among the coral reefs. This much I know, but whether you have wronged her, or whether, as you say, she was driven to her death by hopeless love, I can not tell. This much I do know, the girl was pure as an angel of light."

"And so she was for all the wrong I did her," replied Oscar, hoarsely. "I have offered to swear to it, and I can not do more than this if you cast me out forever."

"We must be satisfied with that," said his father. "Come, Walter; if there is no means of making out the mystery of these voices, let us march at once."

"There is something in this deeper than we can fathom, at present," replied Walter. "Mount and follow me."

The calvacade rode down the pass, followed by a burst of taunting laughter, at which the old rocks rung again. The night was coming on when Walter, who rode in advance, felt his horse tremble beneath him, and then stop suddenly. A dark form lay extended on the grass beneath the hoofs of his horse—a form which remained motionless, after the hoofs touched it. Walter called the party to a halt, and leaping from the saddle bent over the prostrate form.

"It is a man!" he said, "and he seems to have lost his senses. Hi; wake up here, my man! He don't seem to have been drinking, and yet—arouse, old man! What is the matter with you?"

The man moved feebly and stretched out his arm in an uneasy, groping way, as if he were dazed by a fall.

"I—I don't know where I am," he said feebly. "Where are you, Dolf? Help me up, for I have had a fall. Are the mare's knees all right?"

"Never mind the mare now," said Walter. "She is all right, and if you will come with us we will show you where she is."

"I'll go," replied the injured man, rising with the assistance of Walter's strong arm. "I believe she threw me, but I don't lay it up against her for she is a good beast. Where is Dolf? I don't see him anywhere, and he promised to meet me here."

At this moment the beat of hoofs was heard, and a stranger came up at a gallop, leading a mare by his side.

"Strangers," he said, hurriedly, "have you seen a man—why Abe, old boy, how are you? I reckon you have had a fall, for I found the mare on a wild gallop over the prairie. Ar'n't you ashamed, an old mustanger, to be thrown by any piece of horseflesh going?"

She stepped in a gopher hole, Dolf," replied the injured man. "These strangers found me, and now they've done so much maybe they'll tell us how to get to the hacienda."

"Which one?" said Walter.

"De Cordoval; we are old mustangers out of a job, and we reckoned we might have something to do there. We know horses, gentlemen, and that's what the senor wants."

"You are in luck, gentlemen," said Walter. "Here is the senor to speak for himself. You had better ride with us to the hacienda where you will be welcome, and to-morrow you may be able to do something."

"If you are the men I think you are," said Senor Cordoval, "you will be welcome; I will give you work to do, and enough of it. Ride on, gentlemen."

An hour's ride brought them to the hacienda, and the stockmen scattered to their several cabins with the exception of those who had quarters in the hacienda. Jack Dean took charge of the strangers, and led them to his cabin, Sandy McGregor and himself being all that were left of his party. As they entered the cabin the two stockmen looked at their new companions. The one who had fallen was tall, stooping slightly from being much in the saddle, with a pale face closely shaven, and a very decided look about his firm mouth and in his deep-set eyes. In short, he was a bold-looking fellow, just the sort to please the eye of a borderman. The second was a man of a slighter build, with a fair complexion, blue eyes and almost girlish expression. The stockmen fell in love with him at once.

"We are happy-go-lucky fellows, I tell you," said the slighter of the two. "Any cards, stranger? I'd like a game for love as I ain't got any money to throw away."

"We had a game the other night with a big thief that gave me a lick in the jaw that made them sing hallelujah for two days, and they ain't fairly quit aching yet. I'd like to git hold of the low cuss!" said Jack.

An almost imperceptible smile crept over the face of the elder of the two strangers.

"He gave you a good one, eh?"

"Good one; thunder! It sent me on my back quicker than scat! I thought lightning had fetched me, that time sure!"

"What sort of a man was he?"

"Taller than you ar' but straighter in the back—a hard one to tackle. He tore his sleeve on the table there an' showed a red serpent on his arm, an' we went for him but he fooled us; didn't he, Sandy?"

"Aweel, yes, mon; he fooled us sairly. Gin I meet him, soul o' me body but I'll mek him sorry."

"Where was this mark?" demanded the man called Abe, stripping his sleeve to the elbow. "A red snake with his head up, just below the shoulder here?"

"Ay," said Sandy, laying his finger on the naked arm of the speaker. "Ye ha'e a bonny aerm, mon, an' a sair strang muscle. Na doot ye c'u'd gie a mon a diel o' a pelt aif ye were sae minded."

"I'm not a baby," replied Abe, making the muscles rise and fall in great snaky folds. "Now I've seen this chap you are speaking of within a week, and I had a little turn up with him."

"Did you lick him?"

"Dolf said I did, but I don't know. He gave me something to remember him by."

"He was a bonny lad if he was a veellin," protested Sandy. "I hope to meet him ae day. Weel, weel, it's a sair world we leave in, I gar ye understand."

The cards were brought out and they had a merry time, the free-hearted stockmen furnishing their adversaries with money enough for a "stake." They played until the "wee sma' hours" as Sandy said, and drank punch brewed by that worthy, who, at the last, was heard to sing:

"We're na that fou, we're na that fou,
But just a droppie in our e'e;
The day may daw, the cock may craw,
But still we'se taste the barley bree!"

The new-comers exchanged glances of satisfaction, for it had been their plan to make the two stockmen boozy. But, bleared as his eye was, and silly the expression on his face, Sandy McGregor was not drunk!

CHAPTER VII.

FIVE HUNDRED DOLLARS REWARD.

THE carousal went on in the cabin and Jack Dean was the first to succumb; and at last, in beginning again, "Willie brewed a peck of maut," Sandy went under the table and the two new recruits looked at each other across the board.

"They are there!" said the taller of the two. "What think you of the description of the man whom they tried to take in this cabin? Shall we do it? They are dangerous men, that infernal Scotchman, especially."

"We must not do it yet. You see our power, and that at any time we can have them in our hands as tamely as now. No, no; let us be good stockmen for a while, and earn our daily bread by the sweat of our brow. Good faith, our South American experience will stand us in good stead here, since we have set up for stockmen. Now for a little rest."

The two men lay down in the bunks by the fire-place and were soon asleep. No sooner was this done than Sandy McGregor rolled over so that his face was turned toward the bunk in which the sligher of the two men was lying. He was already fast asleep, but for half an hour Sandy lay silent, until the heavy breathing of Abe convinced him that he too slept, when the Scotchman began to roll himself along the floor to the bunk occupied by the younger man. His right arm covered only by the linen of his shirt, for he had thrown off his coat, hung over the edge of the bunk. McGregor had a Bowie with a needle-like point, and inserting this in the cloth without touching the flesh he made a slit about six inches in length, beginning just below the shoulder. Having done this he did not move, fearing that what he had done might disturb the slumbers of the young man. Five minutes after, satisfied that the boy still slept, he raised himself cautiously and parted the slit he had made in the cloth and looked. Although he had suspected something of this, yet it was with a feeling of horror that he saw on the bare arm the blazing sign of the Dukites. The Scotchman fell back on the floor and rolled himself over and over until he reached the door, when with a sudden bound he flung himself out into the darkness, running like a hunted stag in the direction of the hacienda. The old Highlander was fleet of foot and long-winded and the run of a mile was nothing to him. In five minutes he was clamoring for admission at the hacienda gate and when he made himself known he was at once admitted.

"Quick wi' ye, lads," he cried, as some of the men gathered about him. "Rouse up Master Walter and tell him it's no a time to dilly-dally wi' the girls. I want him."

"What have you got to say?"

"Dinna fash yersel', chieff! If onybody ha'e a chance to meik a drap of siller, it's his bounden duty to meik it. Don't waste time, laddie, but ha'e him out."

Walter, who was in the parlor with the rest of the young people, came out at once when he heard who wanted him.

"Why, Sandy; what's the matter?"

"I dinna ken," said Sandy, "seem' ye are havin' yer divarsion wi' the bonny lassies—wether or no yese thank me ower muckle for meikin' ye gang out, but there's the deevil to pay oop till our hoose."

"What's the matter, I say?"

"Ye ken the twa chieffs we found the night oot on the plains? I'm a wee bit afraid they're no so canny as they lookit til the outside, mon."

"Why?"

"Dinna ye think what I ha'e to tell maun be worth a trifle o' siller?"

"If you have any really good information you shall be paid."

"What will ye gi'e me gin I deelever intil yer hand twa o' they Dukites?"

"Give you! Five hundred dollars the moment they are in my hands."

"Five hoondred dollars! My certie, mon, but ye're ower flush wi' the siller. Get help then an' coom awa', for the deil's in it gin they twa dour deils at our hoose are na Dukites."

"Collect ten good men as soon as you can while I alarm my father and the rest. Be quick!"

The Scotchman, sure of the reward, now wasted no time, and when the gentlemen had reached the gate he was there with ten of the bravest men in the hacienda.

"No horses," said Walter, "and I will kill the man who fires a shot before I give the word. Lead the way, McGregor, and make haste."

Sandy struck at once into a long swinging

walk, which caused some of the shorter legs in the party to stretch themselves to the utmost to keep up. At such a pace the distance between the hacienda and the cabin was soon passed over, and the party were halted within ten feet of the door, while Sandy stole up to take an observation. Gazing in at the open door he saw Jack Dean still lying where he fell, while the two men they sought lay in the bunks fast asleep. A grin of triumph passed over the face of Sandy as he thought of the five hundred he would win, and turning he beckoned the rest to come on. Two men were placed at the window with orders to knock any one on the head who attempted to pass out and the rest rushed in at the open door over the prostrate form of Jack Dean. At the first sound of a step on the floor the hunted men were on their feet with a long-bladed knife in one hand and a pistol in the other. They saw at once that in some way they had been betrayed, and as the one calling himself Dolf glanced at his sleeve, he knew how it was that they had been discovered.

"Wait!" said the taller man, straightening his bent back. "It may save two or three lives if you give me a moment's time. What do you want with us?"

"We charge you with the murder of the young man known as Billy Blake," said Walter, "and with being accessory to other deaths. I know your face, David Slocum, and you know that you deserve death."

"Gently, Walter, gently! My pistol covers you, and you know that I never miss. If we give ourselves up, what will you do with us?"

"We will take you to the hacienda and give you a fair trial."

"With yourself and men for judge and jury. That is a magnificent idea, but it does not suit me. Once for all, if you will send us to Tampa to be tried we will yield; otherwise we will fight it out."

At this moment a stout lariat settled over the head of the speaker, and he was drawn with sudden force backward, and the pistol he held exploded without injury. At the same moment the stockmen darted upon the two men, and Dolf was quickly overthrown, but not until he had severely wounded one of his assailants. But with Dave Slocum the struggle was desperate. Although his arms were bound to his sides by the lazo, and he had little use of his hands, he fought desperately with his feet and head, stamping like a wild bull at bay. Half-a-dozen men were on him at once, but shaking his huge form as a water-dog does, he shook them off and managed to free his arms, but before he could raise them he fell under a blow from a heavy pistol in the hand of Sandy McGregor.

"Lie down, ye dour devil!" roared the Scotchman. "Div ye theenk I'm gaun to lose my five hoondred dollars?"

Dave Slocum was down, his hands and feet bound, and the victors stood flushed and panting on the floor of the cabin.

"Seems to me you make mighty free with my ranch," said Jack Dean, sitting up quickly. "What'n thunder are you all doin' hyar? Any man would think it was your ranch an' not mine, the way you kick up a shindy hyar. Hullo, Abe; they've got you in a tight hitch, seems to me! I guess I won't 'low any man that got drunk with me to be tied in my ranch."

"Haul off your hand, mon," said Sandy McGregor, as Jack advanced unsteadily to cut the bonds of the prisoner. "Dinna ye ken that this auld beastie is gray wi' wisdom! That dour thief is ae Duckit."

"Duckit was as near the proper term as the burr under Sandy McGregor's tongue would allow. Jack Dean stared in surprise, and was sober in an instant.

"But, see hyar; I understood that every Dukite had the mark of the sarprint on his arm an' this big 'un ain't."

"Strip his right arm to the shoulder," said Walter. "If the Red serpent is not there David Slocum shall go free, villain though he is."

"You won't find any sarprint on him," Jack Dean declared. "I've seen his arm."

"Did he take the trouble to show it to you, Jack?"

"Yes, he did."

"Then he has some object in view for which I cannot account. Let me look at his arm."

The brawny arm of Slocum was bared, and there was no mark upon it anywhere. For a moment Walter was puzzled, and a look of hope came into the dark face of the prisoner.

"Keep your word now, Walt Delisle. You said you would set me free if you could not find the mark of the serpent on my arm!" he said.

"And I never broke my word yet with a

friend or foe. If the mark is not on your arm you shall go free."

"Here, boys!" said the prisoner, in a cheerful tone; "your leader tells you to cast off these bonds and set me free."

"Not yet, old fellow," said Walter, quietly. "There is something about this that I don't understand, but I never allow anything of this kind to go without studying it a little. When we were friends I remember well that you had three moles in the shape of a triangle just above the elbow-joint. I would like to know where they are gone. Suppose you take up that other sleeve."

"What for?" cried the prisoner, furiously. "Curse you, let me alone."

"Up with the sleeve, boys!" said Walter. "I think I see my way through this thing."

In spite of the struggles of the prisoner the other arm was laid bare and a shout of laughter burst from the men as the two were laid side by side. While both were brawny limbs, nobly proportioned in every way, the left arm was dotted with black moles and covered with black hairs. He ground his teeth in fury as the stockmen laughed.

"Twins, by thunder!" roared Jack Dean. "Something must hev struck into that arm, stranger; 'tain't nigh so pooty as t'other."

"Oh—if my hands were free, if only for a moment!" hissed Slocum.

"A little turpentine here, Jack," ordered Walter, passing his finger over the bare right arm. "I want to make a little experiment."

Jack brought a small bottle of the required article, and while some of the men held the arms of the desperate man, the young leader applied a little of the turpentine, and rubbed it hard. A thin coating of paint disappeared from the arm and the blazing serpent of the Dukite appeared in bold relief upon the white skin.

"I don't think we will let you go just yet, Dave, my boy," said Walter, quietly. "Rope him well and away with him to the hacienda—I have no doubt Senor Cordoval will give him lodgings, as he intended."

An hour later and the two Dukites, heavily manacled, were in the deepest cells which the ancestors of the Cordovals had made beneath the hacienda. Manacles supplied the place of the ropes, and a stout iron belt surrounded the body, and to this was attached an iron chain which in turn was fast to a ring set into the solid stone. Fate seemed to be against the Dukites, yet the sublime faith which had upheld them before, was with them now.

"Wait and hope, my brother," said David Slocum. "Help will come to us, even here."

Dolf said nothing, but there was something in his eyes which told that he was losing hope.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DUKITES IN BONDS.

"WE must look out for our recruits for a while," said Walter, after the prisoners had been placed in the cells. "I never dreamed that we could have the luck to nab this man, for, although I am not certain of it, I believe that he is the master spirit of the Dukites."

"You know him, then?"

"Know him? Who of all the men who ever lived in the South Seas does not know him? There is no crime of which he is not capable, and yet I have never been able to trace a single one to his door. He has the reputation of having been a pirate, but there is no proof. Robberies without number have been laid at his door, and yet he always escaped. Murders have been done and the burden of proof always declared him innocent. That is easy enough when a dozen men were always ready to prove an *alibi*—men whom we did not then know to be members of his infamous band."

"What was he?"

"He has been captain of a whaler and after that of a fast schooner, said to be engaged in the sandal-wood trade, but in reality kidnapping natives to labor on the plantations at out Honolulu. He has lived in Australia, South America and in China—speaks half a dozen languages fluently and is a professor of mesmerism. A man of wonderful boldness, who, if he applied himself to honest pursuits might be anything he chose."

"It is hard to see such rare talents prostituted to such base purposes," said Senor Cordoval, "but while he is our enemy it is good to have him in our power. It was very lucky that Sandy McGregor kept his head clear last night."

"I thought so much of what he has done, that I gave him five hundred dollars for it, and he has earned it well. Jack Dean says he will sell

his head for a football for he has been fooled twice by David Slocum."

"Why was it that he wished to be tried at Tampa City?"

"Don't you see that? Half a dozen of his friends will come in and swear that he was with them in a certain place when these murders were committed."

"I see how it is. But, how can we, if he brings such proof, hang him for the crime?"

"We will search every man who comes as a witness, and all who have the Dukite mark will be detained."

"Do you think they will come here, then?"

"They are very bold men, and there are not many things they will not do, the scoundrels. Let us lay out a plan and keep to it and we shall come out conquerors."

The night passed and Oscar rose from a sleepless couch and went down into the court where he met Jack Dean.

"Do you know that Sandy McGregor and that brother of yours did a neat trick last night?"

"What trick?" said Oscar, carelessly, little dreaming what the answer would be.

"I hope to freeze if they didn't nab the king-pin of the Dukites, a chap they call David Slocum, and another of the same stripe, a smooth-faced little cuss with a voice like a woman."

"Dave Slocum?"

"Bet yer life! Leastways, Walter seemed to know him, an' that's the name he giv him. And, boss, you may knock me all full of holes if you want to, fur I ain't wuth shucks no more, I ain't a patch on the seat of a pair of pants. I'm a mullet-headed galoot with a glass eye, likewise with a wooden leg. A grasshopper on a raft an' a hen under a barril."

"But it can't be; the news is too good to be true."

"And Jack Dean was drunk—drunk—drunk; Jack Dean was drunk ez a b'iled owl, completely cunfuzzled, an' that long-headed Scotchman hauled in the stamps. Yes he did; he raked the pile!"

"How was that?"

"He played drunk, the uncivilized galoot, an' when they slept the sleep of innersence an' purity, he crept in an' opened the sleeve of the young 'un an' saw the red sarprint. Then he crawled out an' got help while I laid there drunk, an' they nabbed the gang. What's more—Walter giv him five hundred fur the job."

"Five hundred! I would have given a thousand—two—three—five, any amount to see Dave Slocum in the toils. Why was I not called when the Scotchman came to the hacienda? Why am I always passed by when there is work to be done?"

"I reckon they didn't need you."

"I'll tell you the reason, if you want to know it: Walter wished to appear as a hero in the eyes of Zoraya, and purposely left me in the background. I'll get even with my good brother, some day, if it costs me my life. That he should triumph—that he should be the one to laugh in the face of my enemy in bonds—Where are the prisoners?"

"I reckon they are down in the cells."

"I must see them at once. It will be something to spit in his face as he lies bound, and to laugh at him, even if I did not take him. Is he in strong irons, chained down like a mad dog?"

"He ain't any ways likely to get away," was the reply of the stockman. "Irons on his hands an' feet an' iron 'round his waist, with a chain in the wall, orter keep him. That's Walter now, and you kin ask him what you kin do."

"Ask him what I can do! Do you mean to insult me?"

"Ska'cely; but he's capt'in, you know, an' we all obey orders here."

"Who made him your captain?"

"We did; hush your clam or he'll hear."

"What do I care for that? I want him to hear me and understand what I say, too. Walt, I hear you have taken Dave Slocum."

"You have heard the truth, Oscar. I am happy to say that we have him bound down in heavy chains in the cells of the hacienda. That was a good night's work, and we have to thank Sandy McGregor for it all."

"You don't claim the honor yourself, then?" said Oscar, in a sulky tone. "I'd be glad to know why I was not called to share in the enterprise!"

"You were asleep, and I did not wish to disturb you."

"I was not asleep. Who the devil can sleep when such accusations are made and believed against him? This story about Mary Vanverne and her brother drove me nearly mad, and I was sitting in my room when you left the hacienda."

But, let that pass and take me down to see the prisoners."

"What do you wish to see them for?" demanded Walter, in an uneasy tone.

"Never mind that; I wish to see Slocum and assure myself that we really have him safe."

"You might take my word for that, I think," said Walter. "But, since you insist upon it I will go down with you."

He entered a low doorway at the south angle of the hacienda, and went through a long arched passage, unbolting several doors as he went. At last he stopped at an iron-studded door before which two stockmen were seated, each with a rifle laid across his knees. A huge key was in the lock of the door.

The two men rose and stood at the "make ready," until satisfied who the visitors were; then they grounded arms and saluted.

"We are going in to see the prisoners," explained Walter. "Don't let any one else pass unless I give you leave."

He laid both hands on the heavy key, and by the effort of all his strength turned it in the lock. Then, shooting back two heavy bolts he applied his shoulder to the door and entered. The two prisoners, who were seated on the benches which formed their bed, turned to look at the new-comers, and Slocum uttered a growl like that of a wild beast as he saw Oscar, who went quickly up to him.

"At last, Dave Slocum!" he hissed. "Well met in the cells of the hacienda de Cordoval!"

"I might have known that this base wretch would come here to exult over us, my brother," said Dave Slocum, slowly, speaking to his friend. "It is like the black dog to insult his enemies when it is safe to do so. Oscar Delisle, your brother is a gentleman. It is through him that we are here, and yet I can not find it in my heart to hate him as I hate you. Look at his face, Walter Delisle, and tell me if it is not the face of a villain."

Oscar made a forward bound and struck the bound man in the face with his open hand. With a leap like that of an imprisoned tiger David Slocum sprang up and struck at him with his manacled hands. That moment would have been his last for his skull would have been crushed like an egg-shell, but, just at the right moment, Walter tripped his brother and he fell, and by the sheer impetus of the blow David Slocum fell upon his face with a resounding crash. Oscar, pale as death, rolled himself out of reach of the heavy irons, and stood up with a look of a demon on his face. The shining barrel of a pistol appeared, but with a loud cry of astonishment and anger, Walter wrenched it from his grasp.

"What would you do, madman that you are?" "Kill him like a dog, as he is; he richly deserves it."

"Then you must kill me first."

"Did you not see him try to murder me? He would have done it, but for you."

"You struck him in the face—the act of a coward. I never thought a brother of mine could be guilty of such an act."

"Stand out of my way!"

"I will not."

"Give me my pistol."

Instead of doing so, Walter cocked it and held it at his brother's breast.

"Stand back! While I live I will defend my prisoner."

"You hound! You dare to come between me and the man I hate. Then you shall go first."

He flung himself upon his brother, when Walter dropped the pistol and caught him by the waist and for a moment the two struggled desperately—one to pass by to the destruction of the prisoners and the other to keep him back. Driven to madness by opposition, Oscar released one hand and struck his brother in the face, while David Slocum at the utmost limit of his chain endeavored to get a blow at either of the two, but especially at Oscar.

"He has done it, my brother," the Dukite cried. "Without our help these two are enemies and what we seek will be accomplished."

Up to this time Walter had not put out all his strength, but with the blow he hurled Oscar to the earth and set his foot upon him. Then too late he remembered that, after all, this man was his brother and he would have given any thing to recall the act. The two guards, who had darted in as soon as the confusion began, but not in time to interfere, now came up.

"Give your orders, Cap," said one of them.

"We are witnesses that you were obliged to throw him."

"I have no orders to give, only that on no pretext whatever must you admit him to this

cell while these prisoners are here. Get up, Oscar; you have done this by your own folly."

Oscar rose slowly and without saying a word shook his finger in a slow threatening manner in the face of his brother and went out.

"He's got a bad heart, if he is your brother," added the guard. "Thunder! You ought to lick him out of his boots."

"I am sorry that he drove me to raise my hand against him," said the young man, sadly. "David, I will see that he does not have another opportunity to insult you as he has done to-day."

"But for you, I would have repaid the insult in a way which would have settled all scores between us," was the reply of the Red Dukite.

Walter went out and closed the heavy door behind him. As he went up the stairs he met Mabel who was seeking him in haste.

"What have you done to Oscar?" she said. "He has been with father, raving like a madman, and crying out that you have insulted him."

"Is he with him now?"

"No; he has taken his horse and is by this time on his way to Tampa City."

He explained in as few words as possible the encounter with his brother, and then hurried to his father's room, who listened to him with a sad look on his face.

"You have done no more than any man would have done under the circumstances, except that you did wrong to set your foot upon him. He is your brother."

"I did that without thought, to keep him down," protested Walter. "I was sorry for it the next moment."

"With his hot, passionate nature it is impossible to say what he will do," continued the father. "Let it go for the present, but you must conciliate him if possible."

"I will apologize as soon as he is cool enough to receive the only apology it is in my power to make to any man whom I have wronged more than he. What is to be done with these Dukites?"

"We will consult with Senor Cordoval and his son to-day, and make up our minds as to what is best to be done. You have seen Mabel?"

"Yes."

"Did she tell you where she was going?"

"She said something about riding to Tampa City to find Oscar."

"Do you think it best for her to go?"

"It might do some good, and for me I shall not interfere. I would go with them but—"

"You must not go. Let Mabel and this sweet child, Zoraya, speak to him, and they will win him back."

An hour later, Zoraya and Mabel rode out of the hacienda and took the road to Tampa City with only a Mexican boy as attendant. The day passed; night was coming on, and Oscar, sullen and moody, rode into the court, alone.

CHAPTER IX.

THE UNLOOKED-FOR BLOW.

"THE sullen boor," muttered Estevan Cordoval; "he has come back without the ladies. I crave your pardon, Senor Oscar, but where did you leave your sister and Zoraya?"

"I don't know anything about them. What do you mean?"

"Have you been to Tampa City?"

"Yes—all day."

"And have you not seen the girls to-day?"

"Certainly not; why do you ask?"

"Because they left here an hour after you did, meaning to search for you in Tampa City, and they have not come back. I know not what to think, for Zoraya knows the roads well, and Juan was with them."

He shouted to a Mexican vacquero, who was near by, and sent him with three or four others to scour the prairie in search of the girls, with orders to one to ride to Tampa and inquire. The news spread like wildfire through the hacienda that the young ladies were missing, and all was confusion. Mrs. Delisle and the mother of Zoraya were wringing their hands wildly and crying out to the men to send help to their loved ones; while the gentlemen, more composed, but not the less troubled at heart, were making preparations to ride out in search.

"The man I have sent to Tampa will make short work of the ten miles he has to go," said Estevan. "Before we allow ourselves to give way to fear, let us satisfy ourselves that they are not in Tampa City."

"They are not there—they are not there," sobbed Mrs. Delisle. "Those dreadful Dukites have taken them."

This was the fear which really occupied every heart, but which only the mother had dared to

“You have boasted of your love for Zoraya,” he cried, fiercely facing his brother. “Why don’t you do something to save her now?”

“I have made no such boast,” said Walter, sadly. “All that man can do I will do for her sake and Mabel’s. Oh, Oscar, lay aside your hate, for a time at least, and join with me like a man in trying to rescue them if they are indeed taken.”

“You will not find me slack in doing this,” replied Oscar. “I hear horses’ hoofs on the prairie.”

Every one ran out into the court-yard, just as the vaquero, who had been sent to Tampa City dashed into the open space.

“What news, Gozo?” cried Estevan.

“They are not in Tampa and have not been there,” replied the vaquero. “But, as I was passing through the gap where Pedro was killed a voice called to me and this letter was thrown at my feet. The man who threw it ordered me to take it to the hacienda, if I valued my life.”

Walter snatched the letter from the hand of the vaquero, for he recognized in it the form usually sent by the Dukites. Tearing it open hastily, he saw the blood-red serpent and underneath these words:

“TO OUR ENEMIES:—The serpent, when it receives a blow, stings the assassin. The Dukites have received such a blow, and two goodly branches have been lopped off. Two brothers of the Order are chained down in the dungeons of the hacienda and they have sent a prayer to us for help. We give it promptly. Two birds have flown from their nest and alighted among us. We make these fair maidens answer for the lives of the two men you have taken by numbers. Return them to us, or a wall shall come into all your hearts when we send you the dead forms of the two who have written their names upon this page.

“We give you the oath of the Dukites, on this sacred symbol, that if these men come back to us before the sun rises, unwatched by you, before the sun sets you shall receive in return, safe and well, those whom you mourn.

“THE RED DUKITES.”

Below was written these words in the handwriting of Mabel:

“We are prisoners and in dreadful peril. Save us if you can, for if we do not have help we have not long to live.

“MABEL AND ZORAYA.”

“Ten thousand demons!” screamed Oscar. “Why did you let the girls go when you knew that these villains were threatening us night and day? Of all the fool’s work of which I ever heard, of all the stupid actions—”

“Oscar!” cried Mrs. Delisle.

“Yes, Oscar and Oscar again! I don’t make it any the less one of the most stupid blunders of which I ever heard in my life. It is simply—”

“Oscar,” said Mr. Delisle, “you must bear in mind that this is not a time for vamping words. We have to make up for the ‘blunder,’ as you name it, by setting the girls at liberty. To do this, we must give up our prisoners.”

“Never! Do you think I would allow David Slocum to go free after all that has been done?”

“We shall take counsel together in a manly and womanly way. As you have made yourself spokesman in this matter so far, permit me to ask why you would not give up the prisoners in exchange for Mabel and Zoraya?”

“I will tell you,” answered Oscar, in a pompous manner. “You will agree that it is important to keep these prisoners?”

“Certainly.”

“And that they will give us a great deal of trouble if set free?”

“Of course.”

“Then listen to me. They have taken the girls and intend to frighten us into giving up our prisoners by threatening to send us the ‘dead forms’ of the girls if we do not give up our prey. This is mere stage effect, and we know that these men, bad as they are, would not take the lives of innocent girls.”

“Did you ever know the Dukites to fail to keep a promise, if it was in their power to keep it?”

“Nonsense; we won’t give up the prisoners, and as for the young ladies, it will be a useful lesson for them not to be imprudent in future. When the fellows see they cannot frighten us they will send Mabel and Zoraya back.”

“Senor Oscar,” said Estevan Cordoval, “it may suit you to speak in that cold-blooded way of leaving our sisters in the hands of these men, but as for me I would sooner go myself, a willing victim, and suffer them to cut me piecemeal, than permit those sweet girls to remain a moment longer than necessary in the hands of men

who stand ready to murder them. Let me remind you that a moment since, and many times since you have been with us, you hinted at love for my sister. Is this your love which would consign her to death to satisfy a private vengeance of your own?”

“Bah!” retorted Oscar. “I see that you are all against me and will do as you like. But, of one thing you may be sure—David Slocum shall never go back to the mountains alive.”

His horse was still standing in the court-yard, ready saddled. He leaped into the saddle and rode out of the court-yard at a furious pace before any one could interfere to stop him.

“I am afraid that he will give us trouble yet,” said Estevan. “By my faith, Walter, it seems strange to me that two brothers should be so unlike in character. What say you, gentlemen; shall we go down and visit the prisoners?”

Walter and his father, with Senor Cordoval, followed the young man into the prison where the guards sat before the door.

“Your work is ended for the present, boys,” said Walter. “You can go.”

The two guards, nothing loth, shouldered their pieces and went out; Walter swung open the massive door and entered the cell. David Slocum looked up with a smile as they entered.

“Give me the letter,” he said.

Walter started and looked at him fixedly.

“You heard me, Walter Delisle. I want the letter which the Dukites sent you when they had turned the tables on you.”

“Do you know in what way they have done this?”

“If it had been my work to do, I should have taken the two girls and held them as hostages. The Dukites generally do the right thing at the right time, and hence I conclude that the ladies are in their hands.”

Walter placed the letter in his hands and he read it attentively.

“Well?” he said, interrogatively, as he returned the letter.

“We agree to the terms, but what surety have we that the promise shall be kept in relation to the ladies?”

“My word,” replied David, drawing up his tall form. “I never failed to keep it yet, unless for such weighty reasons as these on my hands and feet. Where is Oscar? I suppose it offends him to the soul to think that we have escaped his vengeance.”

“I warn you that he has left the hacienda, threatening your life. If any thing should happen to you after we let you go it is not by our wish or sanction.”

He unlocked the fetters, and led the way into the open air. The two prisoners drew in long breaths of the pure air they had lost for some hours.

“Prisons do not agree with me,” said Slocum. “I would not spend another day in one for the worthless life you seek to take. Gentlemen, I agree to a truce of three days, during which time on my word not one of my men will lift a hand against you if you keep the peace.”

“Is Oscar included?”

“If he keeps the truce. If not let him look to himself.”

“We can not control him, nor are we in any way responsible for his actions.”

“So be it, then,” said Slocum. “Before mid-day to-morrow the young ladies shall ride into the hacienda, safe and sound. Be upon the azotea at nine o’clock and you will see them coming.”

Their horses and arms were returned to them and the two men rode away quietly, as coolly as if on their return from a friendly visit. The moon was up and shining brightly, and the people of the hacienda watched them for quite a distance as they rode away. Suddenly the silence was disturbed by the crack of a rifle, and they saw the companion of David Slocum fall forward and clutch at his horse’s mane to keep himself in the saddle, while, with a hoarse, unnatural cry of rage, Slocum set in his spurs and rode after a man who was rapidly disappearing in the darkness. But the horse which Slocum rode had received a slight sprain, and the man who had fired the shot disappeared in the gloom. Walter Delisle ran out alone and assisted the wounded man from the saddle just as Slocum came back.

“The assassin; the cowardly hound, to shoot down men who were protected by a solemn promise!”

“I warned you to be careful, Slocum,” said Walter, “but from this hour he is no brother of mine—if it were indeed Oscar.”

“It was that villain and coward, for I saw him plainly. He fired at me and missed me. How is it with you, my brother?”

“I am all right,” replied Slocum. “The wound is not deep, and I shall be all right in a few days. I will not let this man who has shot at me escape.”

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“Hit hard,” replied the wounded man. “It is not the fault of any one, save that dog, so do not visit it upon the girls.”

“Look here, David Slocum,” said Walter. “I am sorry for this as any man can be, and if you will let me take this man to the hacienda and cure him, he shall go back to you safe as soon as he can walk, provided he will not take advantage of his position in the hacienda to work against us.”

“He is yours,” said David Slocum, who had been examining the wound as well as he could in the moonlight. “It will take a week to cure this, and it would be death for him to ride far as he is now. The girls shall come back, in spite of this.”

He leaped into the saddle so lately vacated by the wounded man and was off like an arrow from a bow. At the command of Walter, three or four men lifted the wounded man, carried him into the hacienda and laid him on a bed, and Walter, who had dabbled in surgery somewhat, washed and dressed the wound, which was in the right side. Having done this he placed a guard before the door of the room and went down below. Shortly after, Oscar rode into the court where he was met by Senor Cordoval.

“Your company would have been welcome here if you had behaved in another manner, sir,” he said. “As it is, you may remain here over night, but in the morning I must ask you to find other quarters.”

“Why? because I shot that infernal Dukite?”

“You shot a man who was under the safeguard of my honor and that of my son, your brother and your father. When you did that you disgraced me. My respect for your father and his family is great but I will not suffer this.”

“Senor Cordoval,” said Oscar, in a very quiet tone, for him, “if you had been hounded and persecuted for two years, as I have been, you would not wonder that my passion gets the best of me sometimes when I meet these men. I intended that bullet for Slocum, but hit the young man instead.”

“If you apologize—”

“I do, most sincerely, and I will try to be guided by you in the future, as to my course. I covet your good opinion of all men on earth.”

“I withdraw what I said a moment since,” said Senor Cordoval. “You will of course do me the honor to remain here as long as it may suit your pleasure or convenience. An apology for a wrong is the only atonement a gentleman can make, but he should always be ready to proffer that.”

“I would be pleased to apologize to the man I have wounded.”

“He is in your brother’s care.”

“Every thing and everybody seems to be in the care of my worthy brother,” muttered Oscar, in a low tone. “Walt, you heard what I said; I want to apologize to the man I wounded.”

Walter led the way, without a word, and they entered the room where the prisoner lay. Oscar approached the bed upon which, white as the pillow on which his head rested—for he had bled freely—lay the victim of his hasty action. He bent to look closer when he started back with a look of horror, doubt and fear combined, as if he had seen the face of one lately risen from the dead. The wounded man, half-rising from his pillow, turned his ghastly face upon the man who had wounded him with a lurid smile of hate, a smile which had deadly threatening in it.

“Stanley Vanverne!” cried Oscar. “Can the dead come out of their graves, then?”

“Yes, they do rise, Oscar Delisle. The man you shot in the back at Tasman’s Point, like a cowardly dog, as you are, now lies here, again shot down by your felon hand.”

“Stanley Vanverne!” said Walter. “Can it be possible that you yet live?”

“It is not only possible but a fact that he failed to take my life, although he tried hard to do so.”

“Then, since you are not dead, and the crime of your murder is not upon his soul, why do you yet pursue him?” asked Walter.

“Ask him! Look at his eyes half starting from his head, his pale face, his quivering nerves! He knows, none so well as he, that while I live, there is no peace for him. Oh, that I were not lying here, chained to my bed like a wounded hound! Take him away or the very sight of him will kill me.”

The guilty man, for he was guilty if we may judge by his face, unable to bear the reproachful eyes of the young man, left the room, reeling like a drunken man. Walter looked after

him with sad eyes for he could not forget that this was his brother, the one with whom he had played in his innocent childhood. Vanverne noticed the look and a better expression came into his face.

"By the sacred sign of the Order, Walter, I wish we could be friends. You have a noble heart in your bosom, a heart which might do great things for the Brotherhood if you were one of us. And if you knew David Slocum as he really is, you could not help admiring him."

"I never could join an order which gives countenance to murder," replied Walter, quietly. "Say no more, Stanley, but try to get well."

The night passed and the sunlight crept slowly down the slopes of the Sierras. As the top of the nearest peak was bathed in golden glory they saw, filing out of a pass, miles away, a line of moving spots. Walter leveled a glass at them—for the entire party were on the azotea—and made out that they were mounted, but whether men or women he could not determine. Mrs. Delisle and the Dona looked at the young man wildly as he still kept his eyes upon the moving figures.

"I can't tell yet," he said, slowly, with his eyes glued to the tube. "In a moment more—I think I can catch the flutter of a woman's riding-dress, but it might be a blanket—no—yes! hip, hip, hurrah! It is they!"

A delighted cry went up from the azotea and they saw four persons separate from their escort and ride toward the hacienda. The gentlemen ran down, mounted their horses and rode away to meet them, and as they came near, to their surprise, besides Zoraya and Mabel there was a third lady whom they had never seen before.

CHAPTER X. VANVERNE'S WIFE.

THE greetings were soon over and without waiting for much explanation the party rode back. As they went Walter looked closely at the person who was with them—a beautiful child, seemingly not more than seventeen years of age with the olive complexion common to the inhabitants of the South Seas. Her hair was of that shining lustrous black so seldom seen in that color of hair, and rolled in rich masses almost to her saddle. Her form was light and full of willowy grace.

"You ask with your eyes why I am here, Walter Delisle?" she said at length—"although you do not speak in words. I am the wife of the man who was wounded and taken to the hacienda."

"Do women know the secrets of the Red Dukites?" cried Walter in surprise.

"You share the usual idea of men that they alone can keep secrets, because all orders which admit women sooner or later cease to be secret in their work unless they change it year by year. But, you must not judge us by orders whose signs and passwords are flung about the streets by boys and girls of ten years of age. Women can keep secrets—some of them at least."

"Be it so; why are you here?"

"I have come to see my husband."

"I have the word of David Slocum that nothing shall be done against us for three days."

"His word shall be kept good, sir. What can a weak woman do to harm you?"

"Weak woman! Umph. I have seen a great deal of woman's weakness in my time, and have found it more powerful than the strength of men. You must expect that we will watch you while you remain under our roof."

"Certainly; I am not in the least averse to that course, if I can be with my husband."

The mothers of the rescued girls could hardly wait for their coming, and they had hardly alighted in the court-yard when they were clasped in those fond arms. Oscar, who had not gone out to meet them, greeted Mabel in a sulky fashion and held the hand of Zoraya in a burning clasp. As he looked up he saw the eyes of the wife of Vanverne fixed upon him with a strange expression. It was with difficulty that he suppressed an oath, for he knew that this woman was keen and cool, and no doubt possessed of his secrets.

"You are not glad to see me, Oscar," she said quietly. "If it were poor Mary Vanverne now—"

"Keep silent, you tiger-cat!" hissed Oscar.

"Or you may forget your manhood and strike me," she replied bitterly, her face wreathed in a sneering smile. "Does it not surprise you, Mr. Delisle, that your son should meet so many old friends of whom you knew nothing?"

"Oscar has chosen his own friends," was the

reply, "and if they have not always been of the best, he has no one to blame except himself."

"Which reflects somewhat upon us," said Mrs. Vanverne, laughing. "If Oscar has feasted his eyes upon my face sufficiently I would like to go to my husband."

"Do you know what I will do with you if you betray me?" whispered Oscar Delisle, in her ear as she passed.

"I can hardly guess; won't you tell me?"

"I will twist that pretty neck behind you!"

"Thanks—how good you are to warn me; very kind in you, Oscar. My good friend, you have greater cause to fear me than I have to fear you. Ruin hangs over your head, and it will fall when the finger of fate is lifted."

She passed on with the same smile on her face and followed Walter, who led the way to the room in which Vanverne lay. Walter pushed open the door and passed in, while the lady paused upon the threshold. It almost seemed to Walter that he could hear the beating of her heart.

"I have brought a visitor, Stanley," he said, gayly. "Be careful now; remember that you are not strong."

There came the rustle of a woman's robe, a low tremulous cry, and a pair of rich ripe lips were glued to those of the invalid. Walter quietly left the room, unwilling to be a witness of the interview. He spoke to the guard at the door, and told him to watch the visitor, and then went down into the lower part of the building. Oscar was the first person who met him.

"How long is that fiend in the shape of a woman going to stay here?"

"That will depend entirely upon the time it takes for her husband to recover from his wound," replied Walter.

"I warn you, that in her, you have the most cunning devil Australia ever produced, and I want you to be careful. She will trick you, if such a thing is possible."

"I think we ought to be a match in cunning for one woman," said Walter, as he passed on. "You have some reason for hating Vanverne and his wife which you do not care to reveal."

"You lie!" shrieked Oscar, furiously. "Who told you—"

He stopped in confusion, seeing that he had committed himself, and in a rage caught his long hair between his hands and gave it a furious tug. Walter passed on with a laugh, leaving his brother stamping furiously in the hall. Zoraya, who had not yet had time to exchange greetings with Walter, met him in the hall, and the little hand seemed to melt into his as he clasped it. Oscar, glaring down upon them from the staircase above, noted with fury the looks they exchanged.

"I am mad enough to join the Dukites," muttered the madman. "I will do it, if they will take me and forgive what I have done in times past. Then, my good brother, beware of me."

Three days passed, and they saw but little of the Dukite and his beautiful wife. Their meals were sent up to their rooms, and once or twice she consented to come into the parlors, where she vied with Zoraya in old songs of the almost forgotten days. On the fourth night the convalescent came down himself, walking feebly, and lay upon a couch, while the women grouped in picturesque attitudes and chatted gayly. His wife sat by him, holding his hand and yielding gracefully when asked to sing. Oscar, hovering in the background, looked at the pair with the eyes of a demon, for he felt that the returning force of Stanley Vanverne was a threat to him.

"I believe the three days of truce which David granted are up, Captain Delisle," said Vanverne.

"Yes; and I am ready to take the field as soon as he. Inaction tires me and I wish to settle our quarrel as soon as possible and have done with it."

"Slocum will not keep you long in suspense," said Vanverne, laughing. "It is comical, after all, to see us sitting here so coolly and talking of this event when we are enemies. You must send me out of this as soon as possible."

"Not until you are stronger," said Walter. "If we all suffer through you I will keep my word to your friend."

"I would give my life for you, Walter Delisle," cried Vanverne, suddenly. "Do you hear me? I would give my life, and the time may come when—my dear, let us go. And tomorrow I leave this roof which has so kindly sheltered me, and with my will the Dukite vengeance shall not reach it."

Kate Vanverne, with tears in her dark eyes, gave an arm to her husband and the two left the room. The night passed and at early morn-

ing when they went up to relieve the guard at the door of the prisoner, they found him lying in a deadly stupor while an empty flask lay at his side.

"Drugged!" said Walter. "The work of the Dukites, who have been here while we slept. Thanks to our precautions they dare not do any evil before Vanverne and his wife were gone."

"I believe that you connived at this escape," cried Oscar, fiercely. "You know that Stanley Vanverne and his wife hated me above all things earthly and would do anything to kill me."

"You know why they hate you, Oscar," said his brother, coolly. "Will you explain it to us so that we can understand as well as yourself?"

"Don't say too much, my good brother," muttered Oscar—the words coming through his clenched teeth with a strange, hissing sound.

"From the cradle in which they rocked you until this hour you have been a stumbling-block in my path, and an end must come soon. I have had enough of this, and if you will not lead the stockmen against the Dukites, I will do it myself."

"You will, eh? I wonder if they would follow you? But, in order to satisfy you I will say that as we are upon the subject I will lead my own men and that soon. And I hope, when we return, to be able to say that we have wiped out the name of Dukite from the face of our chosen land. Trust me, Oscar; there is no man alive who would be better pleased to know that this has been done than myself."

"Why don't you let Mabel lead?" said Oscar. "Since a woman must lead them, she is as good as any."

Walter received the sarcasm with a quiet smile, and turned away. An hour later he was engaged in a close consultation with Jack Dean and Sandy McGregor, who, for the last two days had been upon a scout, and would report to no one save the "captain," as they persisted in calling Walter. While this was going on, Oscar got out his horse and rode away toward Tampa City, against the advice of his father and Senor Cordoval.

"I'm old enough to take care of myself, I hope," he said.

"But you must remember that you have enemies, and that every step you take is in the midst of danger. Mabel and Zoraya—"

"I am not a woman if my brother is," he replied, as he leaped into the saddle. "I shall return in the course of a week and by that time perhaps he will be ready to march. Heavy bodies move slowly, you know."

"I would be thankful if you were animated by the same spirit as Walter," was his father's reply, as the young man rode away. He only replied by a laugh, and they saw him cross the prairie and disappear in the pass between the foothills. He rode on carelessly, whistling a love ditty, when, in the narrow pass, he met a woman whose face was concealed by a thick mask. He could make out that her form was graceful and that the eyes which gleamed upon him through the visor were bright and full of liquid light. Always ready for an adventure of this kind he halted, and, as the lady approached, saluted her with an easy grace which he could assume when he chose.

"Well met, sir!" she said, in a slightly-tremulous voice. "If I am not mistaken, your name is Oscar Delisle?"

"I am glad that you know me so well, fair lady."

"How do you know that I am fair?"

"Such eyes as you have, a sweet voice, a beautiful form—must be accompanied by a beautiful face," he replied, gallantly.

"You are not changed," she said, in a sad tone, "and I had hoped that in times like these, when your life is in danger at any moment, you would assume another tone. Man, wicked as you are, is there nothing in your heart of hearts which speaks of one you have wronged, and to whom you have not made atonement? Have you nothing to regret?"

"No."

"Let me recall a name to you—that of Mary Vanverne?"

"Mary Vanverne?"

"No, not that name, but Mary Delisle, your wife in the sight of man as well as of heaven, whom you wedded by stealth when you found that your flatteries could not break down her purity. Neither force nor fraud availed and you made her your wife."

"False, I tell you; false!"

"You want proof, then. You think you were wedded without witnesses, but I tell you no. Here is the marriage certificate, with the names of three men who, unseen by you, witnessed the marriage."

"The sly jade fooled me, then?"

"She only protected herself from wrong. And when you found her in your way—when she importuned you to save her from shame by acknowledging her as your wife, what did you do? You plunged her into the sea, down among the coral-reefs and left her there to die."

"It seems as if my shame were to be trumpeted through the world, no matter where I fly. Give me that paper, woman."

"Wait; do you want another witness to the marriage?"

"Whom can you bring, unless the sea should give up its dead?"

"Behold!"

She tore the mask from her face and with a wild cry he reeled back and covered his face, for she looked at him with the eyes of her he whelmed among the coral-reefs of the South Sea, his wronged wife—Mary Vanverne!

CHAPTER XI.

THE END APPROACHES.

THIS man's heart was not of steel and it bent before this blow, the most unexpected that could have fallen upon his guilty head. He could not believe that she stood here in the flesh, beautiful as an angel, looking at him in a wild, questioning way to see what effect the revelation had upon him.

"Mary!" he whispered. "Speak to me—tell me that it is indeed the woman I once loved and in the end so hated."

"You see that I am here," she said. "Oh, Oscar, you were saved from a shameful crime by an accident, for when you had hurled me into the sea and fled, you forgot that I had almost lived upon the sea, and when I went down in the deep water at the base of the coral-reef it was only to rise in a place of safety under a shelving rock. I am here to ask you to do me justice, and if you will it is in my power to save you from the Dukites."

"What do you ask of me?"

"Tell all the world that I am your wife; take away the shame which hangs upon my memory like a pall. I know that a new passion has taken the place of one which first induced you to turn against me, but that passion is hopeless. Walter will marry Zoraya if he escapes the Dukite steel."

"I would sooner die any death than see him triumph!" was the fierce reply.

"You know not what you say, Oscar. Hopeless as your love is while I live it is worse than foolish to peril your life in this world and your soul in the world to come, by refusing to listen to me. Great as my wrongs have been I am ready to forgive all and save you if you will acknowledge me before the world."

"You ask too much, Mary," he said, with a sneer. "Go your ways and leave me to work out my destiny as I may."

"Your destiny is wrought already," cried a stern voice. "Seize him, my brothers, and bear him away. Fate has given him into our hands."

Men seemed to rise from the rocks about him on every side, and before he could turn to fly, strong hands seized and dragged him from the saddle. Closely pinioned, he stood in the circle of masked men, who glared at him with eyes in which there was no pity. He knew the men who surrounded him as the Red Dukites and felt that all hope was gone.

"Since I must yield to the inevitable and have matrimony forced upon me in spite of myself, it is best to yield gracefully. I acknowledge this woman as my wedded wife and am willing to take her by the hand as such."

His wife started impulsively forward, but was sternly repulsed by one of the masked men.

"No, no, Mary; you have heard the dog say that he does this upon compulsion and ought to know that he will repudiate the act as soon as he is free. We gave him a chance of life if he would do justice, and he refused. That chance is gone forever, and it only remains for the Dukites to do justice."

"David, as you hope for mercy, show mercy to others," moaned the unhappy woman, as she still tried to pass him.

"Such is woman's nature, yielding to every wind that blows," replied the Dukite. "Number three, take charge of this girl and bear her away. We were mad to allow her to come here, at all."

The mask designated as number three took Mary by the hand and led her away, leaving Oscar Delisle in the circle of his enemies. He felt his danger, yet in this moment bore himself like a man, for he had good blood in his veins, bad and cruel as his heart was. It is a mistake to suppose that cruel men are *always* cowards for it is not always true.

"I am in your hands to do with as you will, gentlemen," he said, in a strangely quiet tone. "I am deeply grieved that it is out of my power to repay, in some manner, the solicitude you have shown for my safety, but it is not to be. As for you, David Slocum, I had thought you brave enough to give a man a chance for his life."

"What do you demand?"

"The chance to fight single-handed, with any weapons you may name against any two of your infernal band."

"The Dukites will think of it. Bear him away to the council-hall, and we will there decide his fate."

With a strong hand grasping either wrist, and a pitiless avenger marching behind with a cocked pistol in his hand, they marched him away by dark and devious paths until they reached the verge of the Demon Bowl. Oscar felt a shudder pass through his frame as he looked down into that dark pit, for he realized that a terrible fate awaited him there. There was no mercy for him at the hands of the men he had so bitterly wronged in past days. Strange as it may seem, this man was more deeply moved by the fact that, his enemies having destroyed him, would give up their designs against Walter and the rest, than by his own peril.

"I'd like to ask you a question, Slocum," he said as they prepared to descend into the "Bowl."

"Ask," was the brief response.

"Having finished me, is it your intention to follow up the rest of my family, my dearly loved brother among the rest?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because, after all, he has wronged you more than I have. You accuse me of the murder of Stanley Vanverne and he is alive; you said that I had wronged Mary, and I have said that she is my wife before you all. My brother certainly killed one of your number at the hacienda, and the rest exulted in the work."

"In other words you would not grieve deeply if you knew that the Dukites had more work to do before their vengeance is sated?"

"Why should he live on, happy and beloved, while I am murdered for a crime long since atoned for? Why should he live to wed Zoraya, while I am laid in a bloody grave by avengers' hands? I tell you that I could come out of my grave to haunt them if this is to be."

"I knew that your heart was bad, villain," muttered the Dukite, "but this baseness is worst of all. We will speak of this in council; go on."

They descended the rugged slope, and wound their way among the low pines at the bottom of the bowl, and as they passed a little excavation the prisoner saw particles of gold shining amid the dirt.

"You are walking over a gold mine," said David Slocum. "In this valley is wealth enough to buy a kingdom, and when we have justified you and all pursuit is over, we will come out of this valley armed with the lever of Archimedes, the power which moves the world. I will build up an order so grand that all the earth shall come and bow at my feet as at a shrine."

"Ten thousand curses! If I could see you dead at my feet I would breathe out my life gladly, die any death."

The Dukite laughed as they moved on silently, and entered the dark passage which led to their secret cave. Here the prisoner was strongly bound to a huge stalagmite which rose from the floor, and for a moment utter silence prevailed in the cavern.

"Be robbed, sons of the Serpent!" said the chief.

From various nooks and crannies the men drew out the white robes which they wore in council, and appeared before the prisoner, each with the long dagger in his belt.

"Senseless mummery is wasted upon me, fools that you are!" cried Oscar. "Whatever you are going to do with me, do it at once. I have made up my mind to die, and if you wring a groan or cry from me it will be because I lose my senses. Red spawn of the serpent, cowards and fools, I defy you to do your worst!"

"He talks loud enough," remarked the chief. "Wait; the council is not yet ended, but you shall hear our deliberations. Come about me, sons of the Dukite, and hear my words."

They gathered around him in a circle, and waited for him to speak.

"This man is tried and condemned already, and we need only speak of the manner of his death. I would torture him in the body, but I know that he would die with set teeth, for he

has a certain brutal courage which would sustain him in an hour like this. You have seen how he hates his brother and that he would die more easily if he knew that we intended to pursue him. By our laws we have the right to pardon an enemy by whom one of us is slain in self-defense. Shall we use that right and let Walter Delisle go free?"

"Yes, yes!" cried the Dukites. "The brood of the serpent knows when you spare. 'Let Walter Delisle go free and unharmed.'"

Oscar writhed in his bonds and uttered a wild cry of rage, for the thought that Walter would be safe—Walter, whom he now hated—while he was doomed to die, drove him nearly mad.

"You see, my brothers," continued the chief, "the dog would be happy in the death of his brother—our enemy, but a brave man. It is decided then; Walter Delisle lives."

"We agree."

"Accepted and recorded. Now as to the manner of this man's death. He has asked as a mercy that he shall die fighting, and has called me coward because I do not grant it. I am not willing to accord him anything, but sooner than he should die making reflections upon the great order, I will give him his will. But, he shall not fight two at once. Any man of the Dukites is more than his equal, but he shall die by my hands."

"No, no!" cried the man known as number eight. "You must not peril your life in such a cause."

"It is my will," was the reply.

Every man was silent, for who among them dare dispute the great head?

"The council is ended. Oscar Delisle you are about to die by my hand."

"Not yet; I am in a trap, and I will not die easily. What are the weapons?"

"These," replied the Dukite, raising in each hand the long Dukite dagger. "Number five and six, take your stations at the entrance to the cave, and if he attempts to fly, shoot him down like a dog."

"I shall not attempt to fly," said Oscar, grimly. "I fight, not for life but for vengeance."

The Dukite threw off his robe and mask and showed the prisoner that he wore no defensive armor beneath his cloak.

Then, by a single stroke of his dagger, he severed the bonds which tied Oscar to the limestone column, threw one of the daggers at his feet and retreated. Oscar picked up the knife and the two began to circle about each other, waiting for a chance to strike a blow. The Dukite was by far the heaviest man of the two, but he lacked the activity of his younger antagonist. Twice Oscar ran in, but the blade of blue steel was ever ready and he bounded back out of distance just in time to escape the point when the long arm of the Dukite was extended.

"You must look out, my son," adjured the chief, tauntingly, "or you may be hurt. Why don't you come on?"

"I am in no hurry," replied Oscar. Ha; take that!"

He darted in suddenly and lunged straight at the heart of the Dukite. But, the thin blue blade seemed to wrap itself about his own, and he could not disengage it. Before he could retreat the blade of the Dukite passed through his shoulder.

"One!" said Slocum, as his antagonist bounded back.

Was the Dukite playing with him? There was a smile upon his hard face and he stood like a rock instead of following up the advantage which he had gained in the first close encounter. Oscar showing his teeth with a tigerish gleam, the blood from his wounded shoulder staining his white shirt, stood for a moment inactive; then realizing the fact that he was fast losing strength, he again closed with an ugly snarl and inflicted a wound in the wrist of his enemy so deep that he could no longer use the knife. Leaping back without turning on his heel he changed the knife into his left hand and met Oscar as he again rushed on, eager to end the fray. The knives of the Dukites flew out like bee-stings, but Slocum waved them back.

"Let no man dare to interfere between us!" he cried. "I must do this work alone, and if I fall I charge you only to attack him singly."

Again they closed, and to the surprise of Oscar he found that the loss of his right hand was no disadvantage to the Dukite. On the contrary, he seemed to fight with greater skill, and a left-handed thrust is hard to parry. Oscar was wounded in three places in this encounter, and beyond the first wound, David Slocum was hardly touched. At this moment they heard the sound of distant shouts and knew that their

enemies had in some way found out their haunt and were upon them.

"Away with you, brothers!" cried the Dukite. "We have been betrayed and you must save yourselves. Take that for vengeance."

He thrust full at the breast of Oscar, who, instead of trying to parry, lunged in return; but at that moment, Mary Vanverne, rushing in from some other part of the cave, threw herself between the combatants, and, to the horror of all, the blade of Oscar found a sheath in her bosom, and she fell prostrate at his feet. The cry which burst from the lips of David Slocum was scarcely human, as, drawing back his hand, he buried his steel in the bosom of his enemy and left it there, the diamond in the hilt gleaming as he fell. The sound of steps came closer, and every Dukite, except one, planting his dagger in the breast of the fallen man, bounded over the prostrate form and followed their leader into the darker recesses of the cave. So quickly was this done that no one perceived that Stanley Vanverne had caught up his dying sister and rested her beautiful head upon his knees. He did not look up as the stockmen, headed by Jack Dean, Walter and Estevan poured into the cave. They stopped short as they saw the dead form of Oscar, and the pale face which rested on the knee of Vanverne.

"There he lies!" said Stanley, in a fixed, stony way. "Only my dagger is not there and it ought to be, for he has murdered this dear girl, his wife."

"Stop not here!" cried Walter, pointing into the cave. "Torches, torches, and follow the Dukites to the death."

They had come well provided and in a moment more forty men, each with a torch in his hand, was following the trail of the Dukites. Walter led the way, for all thought of enmity with his brother was gone at the sight of his bloody form. They could hear the footsteps of the flying Dukites as they dashed on through the great cave, but the enemy had the best knowledge of the ground over which they passed and they gained but little. Still they held on, four of the bravest, Walter, Estevan, Dean and McGregor, far in advance. They came at last to a narrow passage through which only one man could pass, and here the Dukites had posted three of their number, willing victims to save the rest.

"You follow desperate men," said one of these. "I warn you, if you would save bloodshed, to let us go in peace and from this hour you will never hear from us or feel our power."

"Down with them!" cried Walter. By this time the rest of the party were up to them, and in a body they dashed upon the devoted trio. The fight was ghastly in its character, but could only end in one way. Inch by inch these desperate men disputed the narrow passage, giving ground only when forced to do so by the repeated rushes of the stockmen.

One by one they fell until only one man, and that one desperately wounded, stood in the narrow way. His blade seemed charmed and made a bloody road before him as he stepped slowly back. A shot from the rear brought this brave fellow to the earth, the blood bubbling from a death-wound.

"Saul o' William Wallace!" cried Sandy McGregor, "but the daft callant died grim!"

"Tell the chief how I died, and my name will go upon the record which can never die!" he gasped, as his breath left his body, and over his ghastly form the stockmen, now wild with battle-fire, dashed on to vengeance. Their work was not yet done.

CHAPTER XII.

FAREWELL TO THE DUKITES.

THE immolation of the three brave men had not been enough, for again the stockmen began to close in upon the trail. It was hard, for they caught the glimmer of light just ahead, and knew that if they reached that light they would be safe, for the stockmen here could be held at bay for a year if need be. But, it was not to be; all these men could not escape and some must die for the rest.

Who should it be? The chief looked over his shoulder at the coming stockmen, and saw that it must soon come to a hand-to-hand struggle. The blood dripping from his wounded wrist had sapped his powers, and he was in no condition to fight, so that out of the "elected twelve," only six remained fit for duty since Stanley Vanverne had been left behind.

"Some must die, great chief," said number two, who stood next to the chief. "You are not fit to fight, and I offer myself for one. Who will stand with me and keep this pass?"

"I?" cried the man known as number ten, as

he cast away his mask and drew a long, thin-bladed sword which hung at his thigh.

"Why have you thrown away your mask, number ten?" demanded the chief.

"I shall need it no more, my chief," was the reply. "When we two turn back now, we turn back to die. Take me by the hand, and let thy honored blood drip upon it and I shall fight more bravely."

They clasped hands with the chief, received his benediction as a father's blessing and bade the rest good-by. Then they turned back to the narrowest part of the passage, drew their blades, and calmly waited. The stockmen, rushing on incautiously, came suddenly upon the steel points, and a battle royal began under the glittering dome. Those who had fallen so far were mere neophytes, but these two were chiefs of the order, men selected for their skill and valor, and who counted life lightly if by laying it down they could aid the order.

Packed in the narrow space the attacking party could use their arms to little advantage, and before the first of these brave men went down he had sent five men before him to the spirit land. There only remained that gigantic man who had cast away his mask. Under the light of the torches his large, majestic face shone like one inspired, and the Scotchman, who had drawn his old claymore and rushed to the front, dropped his point for a moment before making the attack.

"Stand back, laddies!" he cried. "He's a bonnie lad, an' one fit to dee by the hond of an auld Heelan'mon. Shall we ha'e a tilt thegither, laddie?"

"I'm a Scot, mysel'," replied the giant, "of the tribe McCallum."

"McGregor! Death to the McCallum!"

The swords clashed together, and the stockmen, holding their torches, looked on while the fray lasted. The canny Scot fought like a man who had learned his lessons in many a border foray, threatening now with the point and then with the edge as he forced his enemy back. He had a foeman worthy of his steel, and for five minutes the struggle was doubtful, when Sandy, making a cut at the face of his adversary, dropped his point and drove it through the heart of the giant, who dropped at his feet with a gasp. But the check had been enough, and the four remainder of the Dukites reached the opening which led into the mountain pass, near the place where the mysterious voices had startled the avengers, and especially roused the ire of Oscar Delisle.

At the opening—which was so narrow that only one man could pass through, crawling on his stomach—David Slocum paused and shouted to Walter Delisle:

"Do not dare to follow further, for we can kill you, man by man as you come through the opening. We came to slay Oscar Delisle, and our work is done. As for the Dukites they will live, and in the time to come you shall hear from them again. But we hold no enmity against you or yours from this hour."

He passed through the opening and was gone. From that hour they never saw his face, but the order of the Dukites yet lives, growing in power through all the East. Walter knew that it would be death to follow them through that narrow pass, and went his way through the long passages, taking up the dead as they went. They found Stanley Vanverne yet kneeling over the dead form of his sister.

"Walter," he said, rising, "all we have done has been for her and that grand old man, her father and mine, who was as much murdered by the hand of Oscar Delisle as if he had buried his knife in his breast. I never struck him, yet it has been through me that he died. If you think me worthy of death I offer you my breast. Kill me if you will."

"And kill me with him," said Kate Vanverne, as she took her stand by the side of her husband.

"If he must die I have no desire to live."

"Men," said Walter, "I will vouch for it that this young man has not the blood of one of our friends upon his hands. Even if he had this is his sister who lies dead—murdered I fear by my brother."

"Let him go free!" cried the bordermen.

"He did not intend the blow for her," said Vanverne. "He had chosen to fight with the chief, and she ran between them before he could stay his hand. Enough blood has been shed, and I give you the oath of a Dukite that you and yours shall be safe from this hour."

"Yet we have killed your brothers!"

"In self-defense; it is wanton slaughter we hate and punish. I give you a secret since you give me my life. In this valley is a gold-mine which will make you all rich if you can keep the

secret for two weeks. I only wait to see my sister laid beneath the sod; then we will go."

The last sad rites have been paid to the dead; the Dukite has muttered his last farewell over his slain brothers, and is gone as he came. And Walter Delisle, as he turned back toward the hacienda, felt that a great weight had been lifted from his breast. They kept the secret of the valley well, and when at last a wandering "prospector" found them at work they had lifted the "cream" of the surface digging. But a rich lead had been struck in draining, and a busy-quartz mill now runs above the dark valley which was at once the Dukite refuge and their grave.

Walter Delisle became one of the richest men in a country of riches, and two years after these events he led to the altar Zoraya de Cordoval. And he was not alone, for scarcely had the words which made them man and wife been spoken, when Mabel and Estevan took their places. An hour later they were steaming down the Yuba on their way to San Francisco—the Isthmus and the East. And there no longer hangs over their heads the sign of the serpent—the dreadful symbol of the Red Dukite.

Jack Dean is still overseer for Senor Cordoval.

Sandy McGregor has a ranch of his own, not far from the Yuba, and has taken a wife as thrifty as himself.

In the East the order still lives—in the West it is growing. But men whisper that, under the hand of Stanley Vanverne, it has changed its character, and that blood does not flow for trivial wrongs. A gray-haired, stately man in Melbourne yet directs in secret the workings of the order, and that man is David Slocum. Will the great time for which he hopes ever come to him? We will wait and see.

THE END.

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